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HEVER COURT.

BY

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

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HEVER COURT.

CHAPTER I.

CLARA CHOOSES A HUSBAND.

Mrs. SMITHSON'S best china tea-service was certainly more ornamental than useful, for it was not taken from the cupboard more than half-a-dozen times in the year. When it was placed on her table the entertainment was sure to be very select and the tea good. Then only did Mrs. Smithson allow herself the indulgence of lump sugar, which was contained in a sarcophagus-shaped pot, orna-

mented with the same pattern as the rest of the service, in gold and green sprigs. Then too there was always a hot muffin at the fire, and Mrs. Smithson also, in a gown of ceremony, very much more gorgeous than the dress in which the stout hostess usually discharged her duties.

All these preparations, however, had been made this evening in honour of Mrs. Prickett, who had been invited to take a cup of tea at the White Horse. Hitherto there had not been much friendship between these two ladies. But Mrs. Prickett had now become a notable person in the village, and would have gladly held her head even a little higher among her neighbours, but Will's neglect of her was so obvious and painful,

that the poor woman was really grateful for an opportunity of pouring her disappointment into some neighbourly and sympathising ear.

Clara was not a favourite with Mrs. Prickett: nothing, certainly, could be more bland and kind than Clara's greeting of the little woman, and attention to her in her aunt's bed-room, whither Mrs. Prickett had been shown, to relieve herself of her bonnet and shawl; but for all that, Clara's too evident sense of superiority was offensive.

"I dessay you think my bonnet's a fright," said Mrs. Prickett, placing the article in question, with an almost religious tenderness, upon the bed.

"Well, it ~~is~~ a little pokey," replied Clara, laughing.

"I've had that bonnet five year come to-morrow ; I got it good, a-purpose to last. I don't b'lieve they make such velvet as that now-a-days. But stop a minit, my dear ; yer see I carry my cap pinned under my dress, which it saves me looking so high and mighty as if I had Robert a follerin' of me with a bandbox."

At length Mrs. Prickett's toilet was complete, and they descended to the parlour, where Mrs. Smithson was already making tea.

"I know you like it mixed, mum," she said.

"Thankee, mum," replied the guest ; "I don't like all o' one sort, to be sure. People

do say the green is wakeful, but then, yer know, they'll say anythink."

"They won't say as we're gettin' younger, will they?"

"I wish everybody'd keep their tongues to theirselves."

"Yer might as well wish the rooks down at Thistlewood wouldn't caw," replied Mrs. Smithson, with a laugh.

"Nobody knows how I've been talked about this blessed summer," and Mrs. Prickett looked sadly resigned to the enviable misfortune of her fame; "some on 'em's got it out that I'm his mother; but I'm sure, whenever the old Squire looked at me in church, I never gave him no 'couragement."

"Lor, Mrs. Prickett!"

Mrs. Smithson would have liked to indulge in a good laugh at her neighbour's vanity. It was so funny to hear this little old woman pluming herself upon having successfully and virtuously kept her eyes right during the hours of divine service. But the hostess, good and easy-tempered as she was, had, above all, a reputation as a woman of business. And just now her business was to marry Clara to Will. Indeed, this project was in some measure the unacknowledged substratum of the present entertainment. Therefore Mrs. Smithson was not sorry that her guest had at length brought Will into the conversation.

"He would never ha' been up at the Court but for you, mum," she said.

“That he wouldn’t,” replied Mrs. Prickett, her tone falling to a whimper, and passing into a hysterical fit of crying.

Mrs. Smithson tried soothing monosyllables, and stirring up a fresh cup of tea, put it to Mrs. Prickett’s lips. But it was all unavailing to stop her lamentations.

“And he met me t’other day,” she sobbed, seeming to make an involuntary confession. “He was a ridin’, and he ses, ‘Well, Mother Prickett,’ as if I wasn’t no more to him ’an any other ’ooman. You might ha’ knocked me down with a feather, Mrs. Smithson. I was that hurt that I didn’t rightly know what I did, and I ses, ‘*Mister* William, you didn’t always used to call me Mother Prickett.’ And he laughed, mum; yes, mum,

he did," groaned the poor old woman, "and he looked down at me. 'You weren't at any expense about that lawyer,' he ses. 'But here,' he ses, and he put his hand in his pocket and took out a fi-pun note, 'take this ere, and that'll square up everything.' 'Will it?' I ses, quite quiet, but I felt my heart give a great thump as if it was goin' to break.

"'Will it?' I ses again, for he didn't make no answer, but set looking fust pale and then red and angry. 'If it was money I was wantin', I think I might ha' done better than that.' And then I got away into the fields, where he couldn't foller me, but,"—and now there came a fresh burst of grief,—“I could hear him a-cus-sing and

swear-ing after me—me as had brought him up a'most by 'and. The money will be a curse to him. He used to be free, and now he's as 'ard—”

Mrs. Smithson's kind heart, which must have been large, if it was in keeping with her outward proportions, was deeply moved by the sorrow and the severe disappointment of her neighbour, and her sympathetic looks seemed to reassure and comfort Mrs. Prickett.

But Clara listened with a pale face and a deepening anger, which she seemed to be restraining from expression by biting her lip.

When Mrs. Prickett had gone, her aunt was evidently disposed to lighten the effect of Will's ingratitude in Clara's mind. No

doubt Mrs. Smithson thought that her guest had exaggerated, or perhaps that her manner to Will had been offensive and presuming. However this may be, certainly the genuine anger Mrs. Smithson felt on hearing of Mrs. Prickett's trouble had given place in a great degree to her cherished idea of seeing Clara married to Will.

"Not believe it all, aunt? I believe every word of it. He'd strike her to-morrow, if she were to say a little more."

"For shame, Clara!"

"I know him, aunt. He wasn't such a bad fellow till he got rich. He had a master then; now he wants for nothing, and has no master."

"What a girl you are!"

"A collar round his neck, and a chain and a good whipping now and then—he would be as good as ever he was, and that was pretty bad."

"Lor, Clara, how you do talk! You'll scare all the men away from you if you talk in that way. He wants a wife, a good wife, as would stand by her word, as I did with my poor old Tom. That's what he wants."

Clara quite comprehended Mrs. Smithson's views for her advantage with regard to Will.

"I think so too, aunt; but it must be one that could put the collar on and keep it there."

Mrs. Smithson was quite surprised to find Clara assenting, even though with this sin-

gular qualification, to her notion of Will's requirements.

"I don't think he was so bad, Clara. He was always very civil-spoken. He never had a score against him, leastways not over the week end ; and no man could be more persevering than he was in payin' his addresses to you."

"He hasn't paid many lately, aunt," said Clara, with a malicious smile.

"And more shame for him. It's been a trouble to me, Clara. I was frightened it would set you a frettin'."

"I don't fret, aunt," and Clara smiled with quiet contempt. "But, you dear old aunt, what would you think of the dog that went and bought a collar and a chain and a whip,

and then brought them all to you, and told you to put on the collar, to fasten the chain, and to whip him when you pleased? He wouldn't be like the dog in the manger, would he, you dear old creature?"

"Well, but you can't go to him yourself," said Mrs. Smithson, surprised out of her sense of propriety for a moment by Clara's extraordinary mode of putting the case.

Clara's back was turned to her aunt. She was standing before the fire in an easy attitude, her arms lightly resting on the chimney-piece, and one foot on the fender, her eyes looking down into the burning coals.

"I might, perhaps."

"You wouldn't bemean yourself!" exclaimed Mrs. Smithson.

"Oh! don't be afraid, aunt. I only meant that I might ask him to marry me, perhaps."

"What! ask a man to marry you! Why, I wouldn't have a girl o' mine ask the Prince o' Wales—there!"

"If I do ask him, he will, aunt." Clara had scarcely heard her aunt's explosions. She seemed to be thoughtfully following her own reflections, and the fire-light showed no trace of emotion upon her face, only a settling purpose and a firm, steady will.

Mrs. Smithson could say nothing more. She seemed to be gaining her purpose; but then Clara's talk had been very shameless—at least, so it seemed to her. When she

bade her niece "good-night" and kissed her, Clara said, "You ain't angry, aunt?" and she had said, "No, my dear," but in a tone in which she couldn't avoid conveying the impression that she was rather shocked than pleased by the turn affairs had taken. With all Mrs. Smithson's free-spoken heathenism, as Mr. Fipps would have been disposed to call her manner if he had been given to any other than the most common and professional forms of speech, Mrs. Smithson was dismayed by Clara's language not less than by the manner in which she had spoken. It was her great happiness to believe that Clara was a real lady, and her ambitious designs upon Will were in no way selfish. She thought that, as mistress of Hever

Court, Clara would be in her right place, in a place much more fit for her than the parlour of the White Horse. But though she had heard much talk of ladies, yet she had an uncomfortable presentiment that real ladies didn't speak as Clara had spoken, and the consequence was that Mrs. Smithson went to bed very uncomfortable.

And Clara sat in her own room, furnished and arranged with an elegance, simple, yet in perfect good taste, such as no mere passer-by would have supposed could have been found in any apartment of this wayside inn. Her hair was unloosed, hanging low on her bare shoulders. Every other moment the brush she was using would drop in her hand, and her face assumed the look of deep

settled thought it had worn while she gazed into the firelight below.

“He said he loved her with all his heart,” she murmured. “Why do I love him still? I don’t; I hate him—I hate her. When I heard him say that, I felt as if I could have killed him. And then I made up my mind to marry Will.” Her eyes grew more lustreously beautiful with the lurid light of revenge and triumph, for she saw herself mistress in the house of which Edward had been dispossessed, and to which he had longed to lead Lucy as his wife.

CHAPTER II.

CLARA TAKES A WALK TO HER ADVANTAGE.

BUT although Clara, influenced by revenge and ambition, had determined to make herself Will's wife, she knew that her end was not easy to accomplish. He could now command the society of other women not less beautiful than herself, and she knew that already many of the neighbouring gentry had called upon Will and recognised him as the Squire of Bingwell.

Yet for all this she felt certain that the mastery she had once held over him was

not, could not, be destroyed. In his very avoidance of her of late, she saw that it still existed in perhaps greater strength than ever. Was it not plain that he knew, as she knew, that if they came together he must surrender? The feeling which she had for Will was not contempt, but she was proudly conscious of her own superiority.

Still there was no time to be lost, or some wealthier syren would go before her and carry off the prize.

Armed with her showy beauty, set off to the greatest advantage by all the little resources of her toilette, producing a very charming result, she took solitary walks in the pretty, quiet lanes around the village,

hoping and expecting to meet Will, who was frequently riding about his estate.

Fortune favoured her during the third of these artless expeditions. She was sauntering in a lane, long, but full of turnings, when she heard a firm footstep behind, and Will's voice angrily calling a dog from the adjoining wood.

Her heart seemed to flutter with excitement. It had been easier to form her resolve than now actually to set herself to her purpose. Should she turn and fix him? Her will wavered with irresolution. He might not have seen her when he called the dog, but now he must know that she had heard his voice, and if he wished to do so, would be ashamed to turn back. Besides,

had he not to be pardoned for his recent neglect?

Ah, the magnet had not lost its power! She heard him drawing nearer and nearer, evidently intent upon overtaking her. Now for all the power of her beauty, now for the exquisite delight of revenge and triumph.

“Why do you walk so fast, Clara?”

She turned round, blushed, and took his out-stretched hand.

Clara could not but notice the improvement in Will's appearance. It is true his face looked less healthy and his eyes less bright, and they were bloodshot. But his rich brown velvet shooting-jacket and general dress was that of a gentleman, set off with

two or three costly and massive articles of jewellery. He was always cleanly shaved, instead of as formerly but now and then; and his face was handsome but for a look of coarse and determined self-indulgence which it always wore. His thoughts on seeing Clara had been just as she had supposed. He had wished to escape from her, and yet he felt an irresistible attraction towards her. She was not walking fast, and he had never called her Clara before.

“Oh! Mr. Frankland, is it you? But I must ask you to remember that I am commonly called Miss Smithson.”

The gentlest possible expression of injured innocence mingled with Clara's blushes.

"I thought—you know—such old friends," blustered Will, with confusion.

"You didn't call me Clara when we were old friends."

Will couldn't say that he trusted his wealth had given him the right to this familiarity. Yet he knew this to be the truth. He had been half afraid to approach Clara, yet he never thought when he did so he should find her as inaccessible as in the old days. It seemed to him to have happened just as he expected. Here he was walking beside her, feeling her beauty in every vein, and yet he, Squire of Bingwell, master of Hever Court and of all the land around them, was stammering his excuses like a naughty boy at the national school.

"Ain't we old friends still?" asked Will, with sudden despondency.

"It is not for a poor girl like me to say. I thought not, as you kept away from our house."

"Hah, haw,"—Will was regaining himself with the help of her demure humility—"I've had a lot of things to do. There's Lord Nantwich wants me to come and stay with him, and Lady Denman always running after me, and—lots o' things, you know."

"And you like the great people," she said, with scorn, her eyes flashing for the first time upon him.

"I'm hanged if I do! They look at you as if you weren't made in the same way that

they are, and everything you do is wrong ; you can't talk right, nor walk right, nor eat right,—do nothing only spend your money right. They don't complain of you about that."

He was really very proud of his new friends, and quite intended to make Clara feel the importance they gave him ; but she had surprised and startled him into an honest expression of his real sentiments regarding them.

"And none of them are half as handsome as you are, Clara." She allowed the familiarity to pass this time unnoticed ; for he spoke in passionate disregard of propriety, and, besides, he made her a very acceptable compliment.

"You are learning their ways, I see," said Clara, laughing; "you say things you don't mean."

"No, that I don't; I should like to see you turned in with 'em. I say," he continued, "will you come out with the hounds to-morrow? I'll give you the best lady's mount I've got in the stables."

"I couldn't do that." But her voice implied that she wished she could, only that it would be so outrageously improper.

"Oh, bother! I s'pose I may come down to the White Horse?"

"Aunt will be very glad to see you, I dare say."

"And won't you—eh, Clara?"

"Well, yes, I shall too."

She held out her hand at parting with a most bewitching smile. It was too much for Will. He caught her quickly by the waist, and drawing her to him in his strong arms, kissed her with all the assurance of an accepted lover before she could express her surprise or resentment.

Then, blushing and indignant, she said, "he had forgotten himself," and he, only anxious to commit his sin a second time, declared "he hadn't, and would she meet him again?"

"I'm always at home," said Clara, demurely, her eyes fixed on the ground.

But Will urged his fear of Mrs. Smithson, the pleasure of the open air, and, in his selfishness, "what people would say?" Clara

saw how little thought he had for her honour or good name ; but felt that she could be the sufficient guardian of these.

“Do say you’ll come to-morrow week,” pleaded Will. “I’ve promised Lord Nantwich I’ll spend this week at Dropton, and I must go.”

Clara consented to meet him in the same place next week, if he would promise to behave himself ; and, on the whole, she saw no reason to be displeased with all that had taken place.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH WILL SEES HIGH LIFE.

VISCOUNT NANTWICH was a peer of quite a modern type. He affected an indifference to rank, but yet in his manner there was an indolent hauteur which contradicted his affectation as plainly as though he had worn his coronet and robes in everyday life. He was a man of taste and refinement ; and the elegance of life at Dropton was famous. Rich, young, and unmarried, his society was courted for himself and its advantages, but

Lord Nantwich acknowledged to himself no object in life.

He had a hearty contempt for a mere "swell," and a ready disgust for ignorance or ugliness ; but higher than this was above his head. The consequence was, that he was a pleasant host to those whose characters were in harmony with his cultivated senses. He was not a man who, from a feeling of neighbourly duty, would have asked Will to spend a week at Dropton, and in truth Will owed this invitation to his mother, who, with himself and his sister Ethel, made "home" at Dropton. Lady Nantwich had insisted upon this civility being shown to Will. She was the high priestess of the county society, and the

Franklands were of the front rank of the squirearchy. Lady Nantwich bestowed the whole of her intellect upon the management of the county society. In her view of it no one was duly admitted until she had *viséd* his passports. She was the great power, and without her recognition no lesser powers would be in a position to make treaties or alliances. The Franklands had always the privilege of doing suit and service to her as squires of Bingwell and lords of Hever. So it was necessary that Will should be recognised, and accordingly he had been invited by Lord Nantwich, not discourteously—he could not be discourteous—but with no unusual anxiety that Will should accept.

Will did accept, and readily. It was not an unmixed pleasure to betake himself to an atmosphere so uncongenial, but it was a triumph of which he felt proud. He wanted to get all the enjoyment he could out of his wealth, and perhaps this was the way. He didn't know. It would be a fine thing to shoot the Dropton coverts as the guest of Lord Nantwich, but he would be very glad when the visit was over. It would be more pleasant still to meet Lucy Denman there, and use his influence over her to his own advantage. He was not afraid of Lucy as he was of Nantwich, and if he were to marry her he felt he would have thrown nothing away; her beauty, her social position, were so much

more gain; and then she was an only child.

But since all this had passed through his mind he had seen Clara and had kissed her. More than this, she had consented to meet him clandestinely, and Will, whom wealth had made more than ever the slave of his passions, felt all the intoxicating delight of this familiarity with a girl of Clara's grace and beauty. He had no intention, however, of marrying Clara, and far from neglecting his visit to Dropton, his success with her made him only the more anxious to go, for it was impossible to doubt he would be a far greater man in her eyes when he could boast of such distinguished friends.

Yet Will looked very ill-at-ease as he entered the drawing-room at Dropton in unaccustomed evening dress. Lady Nantwich gave him her hand with a few courteous words of welcome, silently resolving that he was an irreclaimable "clod." Lady Denman he knew, and Lucy. Nantwich presented him to his sister, Lady Ethel Morley, who made him a most frigid bow, and then to the Bishop of Waltham, who shook hands with him in a most friendly and re-assuring manner.

The dinner-party was small and conversation general. Will sat at Lady Nantwich's left, between her and Lucy. He annoyed Lucy several times during dinner by assuming a low, confidential tone in his remarks,

which in a more numerous company might have been less offensive.

Her mother perceived this, and not disapprovingly. Although Nantwich was the husband she had now chosen for Lucy, yet Will was to be preferred to Edward. Uncertain whether she still cared for Edward, Lady Denman had spoken of him several times recently as "that unfortunate young man," or "that poor young man," implying that he had altogether dropped out of their sphere, and was entirely dead to their world. But Lucy's answers betrayed no extraordinary concern, and Lady Denman, for her own part, hoped her daughter would not be unprepared to acquiesce in the inexorable logic of fortune, and allow Will to take the

place which Edward had formerly occupied in her regard, if the greater prize was not to be had.

At the end of five days Will found himself very far from being at home at Dropton. Lord Nantwich was civil, and called him "Frankland" quite in a friendly way; but then there had been two or three passages between them not quite pleasant to recollect, which made Will dislike his host, yet which he didn't know if or how he could resent.

One day they were out shooting, and when Will had spoken angrily to one of the keepers, Nantwich said, quietly,—

"I dare say they'd be better for it; but I never swear at my servants, Frankland, and I wish you wouldn't."

Then, on more than one occasion, Nantwich had risen to leave the dining-room, purposely, as Will felt, to prevent him from taking more wine. Now to his mind the drawing-room appeared an ordeal which he would be better able to face after a bottle of port.

But Nantwich had committed a worse offence than this. Will found himself every day more and more captivated with Lucy's beauty. She was the only person from whom he did not seem to have experienced some personal slight. She had kindly helped him through several difficulties in conversation. Even the bishop had reproved him for some offence against propriety. Lady Nantwich had become very

cold and formal in her manner ; she clearly gave notice that she did not intend any friendship or intimacy with Will. Lady Denman discouraged his attentions to Lucy, preferring those of Nantwich.

He saw how Lucy was beloved by all ; and then her gentle, graceful beauty, her soft and easy manners won all his admiration. If he could only gain her, he felt that she would teach him how to parry the keen tongue-thrusts of Nantwich, how to act the manners of society.

He hated these great folks, but he longed to carry off this prize from them. He longed, too, to get back to Hever, where he could follow without reproof the bent of his inclinations ; but he would have Lucy, too,

if he could. In the wayward impulse of his passion he had quite forgotten Clara. He attributed Lucy's kindness to him to fear of his threats, and partly to a more tender feeling which probably his attentions had inspired. And he resolved to ask her to be his wife before he left Dropton.

He tried to gain an opportunity that evening, but Nantwich led her away from him to the piano, and monopolised her attention. Next morning, however, which was the last day but one of his stay, he was smoking in the gardens when he saw Lucy, with a book and some work in her hands, going towards an old summer-house commanding a charming view of the lake, and itself thoroughly hidden among trees.

Allowing her time to be seated, he leisurely followed, unobserved, as he was delighted to believe, by any one.

In the short path leading to the summer-house Lucy saw him approaching. It was quite impossible to avoid him. She could only leave by the path in which he stood. Besides, Lucy was not the girl who without direct provocation could commit a rudeness of this sort. She felt some compassion for this big, rude man, whose ignorance of good manners was so much rather his misfortune than his fault.

Will thought she had never looked more enticing. Her garden-hat lightly seated on her smooth brown hair, the fresh and pure beauty of her face, her dress, as always, so

exquisitely neat and perfect. Had Lucy been a fairy seeking to allure him, she could not have taken a form more captivating, or been seated with accessories more seductive.

"You see I've found you out, Miss Denman."

"Yes, this is quite a favourite place of mine. The prospect is so charming. I am sorry to hear you are leaving Dropton to-morrow, Mr. Frankland."

"I fancy you're the only person that is, then," said Will, with a hoarse laugh ending almost like a growl.

"These people don't suit me," he continued.

"Why not? There cannot be a kinder,

truer gentleman than Lord Nantwich, and the bishop wouldn't offend any one."

Lucy shrank from him with an indefinite feeling of terror as he entered the summer-house and took a seat at her side. He observed her movement.

"You needn't run away, Miss Denman," he said. "I haven't got very much to say to you, but what that is I want you to hear."

The colour left her cheeks. She remembered she was far and hidden from the house, quite in the power of this strong, wilful man.

"You remember that day at the village show yonder, don't you?" he continued. "I didn't tell you then right straight out

what I wanted, though I thought you'd understand me. Shall I tell you now?"

A look of pallid, sickening fear was in Lucy's face, as if she saw looming before her an inevitable and dreadful doom.

"Yes," she said mechanically, listening with the same look on her face, anxious to hear the worst.

He had quite intended to make his proposal in lover-like fashion; but he instinctively felt her aversion, and was forced to be more business-like.

"There are many girls who would be glad of the chance," grumbled Will; "but I love you. Will you take me, Lu—Lu—Lucy?"

Her face expressing surprise, shame, and

terror, Lucy rose, and saying, "No! I can never love you," firmly and distinctly, attempted to leave the summer-house. But Will barred the way with his arm.

"Why can you never love me?" he asked, his rising passion increasing his self-confidence every moment.

"Because I cannot." There was far less terror in Lucy's face now; the insult of detaining her by force had called an angry flush to her cheeks.

"You love Master Edward," sneered Will, with brutal coarseness.

A deep blush overspread Lucy's face.

"I do not!" she said boldly, at the same time angry with herself for submitting to his questioning.

“Are you prepared to take the consequences of refusing me?”

“What consequences?” asked Lucy, becoming pale again.

“Don’t make me do it. I love you, I do indeed,” urged Will.

“I could never be your wife—it is impossible!” Lucy spoke firmly and proudly.

“Then am I to make public all that I know?”

“Are you capable of doing it?” asked Lucy, with bitter scorn; “of blighting the few remaining years, if not of killing my father!” — her voice failed and fell in tremulous accents; — “of pretending to force my will by destroying the happiness of my parents?”

“One of us must give way,” muttered Will; “and why not you? I don’t want to hurt your father.”

“Then I will not give way.”

“You won’t?”

“No. I don’t feel it is my duty to sacrifice, not the happiness,” said Lucy, bitterly, “but the dearer self-respect of my whole life, to purchase your silence.”

“Then I will!”

“You must do as you please. Let me go out, Mr. Frankland; we can have nothing more to say to each other.”

Why was she so splendidly angry? She had never appeared to Will half so beautiful as now in her anger. He stood hesitating in the doorway inflamed with admiration

and enraged at the thought of losing her. He knew that if he lost her now, he lost her for ever. Small chance of liberty would Lucy have had if this had been some wild country and Will a lawless chieftain. He knew that he was within hearing of the house—at least, he might have known if he had reflected ; but unreflecting—blind to everything but her beauty and his desire, he tried to catch her in his arms.

Lucy gave a loud scream, and managed to place a chair between them.

Will was scrambling this little obstacle away, his back still towards the door, when Lucy saw Nantwich's hand on his collar and Will thrown backwards.

In a moment he was up and facing his

unexpected antagonist; but before Lucy could interfere by word or gesture, Nantwich had knocked him down with a stunning blow in the face. Again Lucy had to witness this horrid performance, which, but for the blood on Will's face would have almost seemed a pantomime, so certainly did Nantwich deliver his blows, and so utterly prostrate was Will twice laid.

Seeing him motionless on the second fall, Nantwich turned to Lucy,—

“I'm sorry, Miss Denman, you should have sustained this annoyance, and at my house. The brute can't box!”

He was going to lead her indoors; but Will was up again, no longer anxious to

fight with Nantwich, but fearful in his imprecations of revenge.

Lucy was leaning on his arm as Nantwich turned towards Will. He could feel her little hand trembling, and slightly pressed it in his arm.

“I have only one word to say to you, sir. My carriage will be at the door in half-an-hour,”—Nantwich looked at his watch as he spoke,—“and if you don’t avail yourself of it, you and everything belonging to you will be turned out of Dropton before an hour.”

The carriage took Will and his luggage, but it didn’t improve his temper to be compelled to exhibit his swollen, blackening eyes and cut face to the coachman and foot-

sence inspired was quite sobered by the punishment he had received. He hugged the consciousness that he had the means of retaliating his discomfiture upon her. But what he craved was something by which he could show that he cared nothing for "the whole lot of them," in which he included the family and the visitors at Dropton.

When he came near home another difficulty presented itself. Will knew he was unpopular in the servants' hall at Hever Court, and that although he was the eldest and the legitimate son of their old master, his servants held him in far less respect than Edward. To keep the Dropton servants from gossiping with his own, therefore,

respecting his unceremonious departure and unexpected return, became all-important.

Will's eyes were awfully swollen when he alighted upon his own doorstep. He ground an oath in his teeth at the old butler, who, seeing him covering his face with a handkerchief, received him with, "God bless me! 'fraid you're hurt, sir," and then, turning to Lord Nantwich's coachman—he couldn't look up at him—Will mumbled something about "stables being full"—"Lord Nantwich particularly desired they should make haste back"—"better lose no time"—"good-night, and—here!" which concluding monosyllable directed the coachman's attention to a sovereign.

To his great delight, they exchanged no

words with his servants. The horses were turned immediately, and trotted down the avenue on their way back to Dropton.

But if Will could have followed them along the road to his own park-gates he would probably have regretted that he had not entertained them at Hever; for the coachman immediately took the direction opposite to Dropton, and was evidently making for the White Horse.

“Rayther shabby, James,” he said to the footman, “not to offer us a drink o’ beer, nor nuthin; howsomever, we’ll wet this suvering, and I ain’t a goin’ to drive my horses back ’ome without a rest.”

Mrs. Smithson and the coachman were old friends. They approached each other in

size, at any rate, more nearly than the rest of the world, and the hostess was soon in possession of the object of their drive.

"I wonder he warn't above comin' home in my lord's carriage," said Mrs. Smithson.

The coachman, holding a large glass of gin-and-water in his hands, winked at James, and then both looked at Mrs. Smithson very knowingly.

"I rayther think he got the sack," said the coachman, solemnly.

"Lor ! how d'ye mean ?" asked the hostess.

"I rayther think, mum, there was a fite 'twixt him and m' lord — wasn't there, James ?"

"I sor m' lord comin' in," corroborated

James, "with the young lady, Miss Denman, and he ses, 'James, horder the big carriage to be at the door in half-an-hour, to drive Mr. Frankland to Hever Court.' I could see the young lady was rather flustered, and then Mr. Frankland came in, his face covered with blood."

"He'd bin a towzling o' the young lady, you may 'pend upon it." And this opinion of the coachman's being uncontradicted, was adopted as correct by the three.

It happened in the natural course of things that within a few minutes Clara had heard all her aunt's news, and knew that Will had been turned out of Dropton in a most disgraceful manner, after being thrashed by Lord Nantwich for improper

behaviour to Miss Lucy Denman, who was on a visit there at the same time.

But as Clara preferred to be the guardian of her own secrets, and to conduct her affairs in her own way, her aunt did not know that she had an appointment to meet Will the day after to-morrow.

On the whole, Clara saw no reason to regret what had happened. It seemed a fatality that he too should have been charmed by Lucy ; for she shrewdly guessed that it was Will's too amorous attentions to Lucy which had brought upon him Nantwich's punishment. No girl likes a man the better for having been beaten by another ; but Clara was too clever not to perceive how great a gain it was to herself and to her designs.

However, she would be true to her tryst, though if they had not exaggerated Will's condition it was scarcely probable that he would keep his appointment with her.

But the next day, as Will sat alone in the library at Hever Court, his right eye poulticed,—the damage to the other had not proved very much,—he thought more of Clara than of any one else. He was wretched and lonely, craving revenge and sympathy. He remembered his assignation for to-morrow, but he could not endure the disgrace of meeting her with his face in this battered condition. She seemed to be his only remaining friend. She was so bold and spirited, yet with such superior intelligence and manners, that in his abasement

he seemed to regain the old feeling of admiration for her, which had been so strong upon him before his elevation. With her by his side, he could defy these proud people who had turned him out of their society with so much disgrace. But he must not disappoint her. He was not much accustomed to writing, and he had torn up four notes before he ventured to send the following to Clara at her aunt's house :—

“DEAR CLARA,—

“I have had an accident, and cannot meet you to-day. Dear girl, do meet me on Wednesday.

“I remain, yours truly,

“WILLIAM FRANKLAND.”

A week ago, and Will would have hesitated before sending one of his servants with a note addressed to Clara ; but now he was careless. When the note was gone, he thought more of her ; he had publicly committed himself with regard to her. In his first elation, in his newly acquired greatness, she had fallen out of her place in his mind rather because he felt it was necessary he should throw off all his old belongings. Then the friendship and courtesies of the Denmans and of the Nantwich family had somewhat turned his head. All his life he had looked up to these people as being so inaccessible that to sit down with them in free and equal social intercourse had broken his heart loose from the ties which in the

old time had made it so willingly Clara's. Now all this was changed ; he found he had nothing in common with his new friends, and that which in him was love reverted to her. He had all but determined to marry her. He had a vain, vague idea that this would pain Lucy, and then he knew that Clara's cleverness and strong will would assist him in any schemes of revenge.

Meanwhile the note arrived at the White Horse, and Clara's face flushed with a triumphant smile of gratified pride as she read it. She sat for a minute, apparently thinking, with Will's scrawling round hand before her eyes, and then called the servant who had brought it.

Her manner was dignified and composed,

as if she were already his mistress. The man was inclined to grin, supposing his mission to be somewhat confidentially illicit. But rustic as he was, he at once checked this disposition.

“Give my compliments to your master,” said Clara, authoritatively, “and tell him that I will bring what he wants myself, as I shall be passing the Court in an hour’s time, and that I am very sorry indeed to hear of his accident. Now let me hear you repeat that message.”

The man blundered the first time, but at the second repeated it perfectly, and Clara dismissed him, with a caution not to forget a word of it.

She had acted upon an impulse guided by

her knowledge of the man with whom she had to deal. Will's note told her that this was her opportunity. It was now that he was forlorn and miserable that she could gain dominion over him. By next Wednesday he might have returned to his weak preference for a wealthier alliance. As for the impropriety of going to see him, she did not overlook this, but she felt it somewhat unimportant. For if she failed in her design, what mattered to her the opinion of Bingwell? If she succeeded, she could well afford to disregard it. She could, at all events, take good care of herself. And besides, the terms of her message, puzzling as they would be to Will, were to some extent a shield for herself, her aunt having a local

reputation for the preparation of lotions to which many rapid cures of wounds and bruises were ascribed.

Still it was not without some tremor that she rang the bell at Hever Court, and asked for Mr. Frankland.

"I thought your accident might be serious, Will, and that you were alone, and had no one to speak to."

"Oh, yes; hit my head—out hunting—'gainst a tree, you know," replied Will, in some confusion as to how he should disguise the cause of his disfigurement.

"I was afraid you couldn't walk," said Clara, timidly. "Tell me what you did at Dropton, and whom you met there," she added.

"I hate the whole crew—a set o' proud devils." He felt he ought to say something about Clara's kindness in coming to see him, and the words were on his tongue ; but then he reflected that she would think she had blinded him to her purpose, and he thought he knew what that was. But that this handsome girl should run after him was by no means unpleasant, whatever might be her object ; and was especially soothing just now.

"I suppose Lady Nantwich is a proud old thing? But Lord Nantwich—I danced with him here—I thought he was a delightful man."

Will looked unutterably black and angry.

"And Lady Ethel," continued Clara,

speaking of the Dropton people in a tone which implied mental, if not social equality, "I have often met : you know I was with her great friend, Lady Anne Dunkeld."

Still he made no reply. But he thought she was quite as much a lady and very much nicer company than Lady Ethel Morley.

"But I mustn't stay," she continued, rising abruptly. "I only came to see if there was anything I could do for you."

"Don't go," he said, with a look almost like the humble admiration she had been accustomed to receive from him in the old times.

"I must; I ought not to have come."

And her eyes were downcast in maiden modesty.

Will's mind was made up.

"Look here, Clara," he said, with both hands in his pockets, in an attitude and voice which would have led any one, apart from the situation, to suppose he was dealing with a drover; "I know you wouldn't have me when I was a poor feller, and I don't blame you for it. But perhaps you won't say 'No' if I ask you now; and I tell you what, I think I shall go mad if I live in this blessed great place any longer by myself. I'll give it all up to you. Will you have me now, my girl?" And now he stretched out his hands to embrace her.

"You never asked me before, Will; you

must remember that," she said, smiling archly. And she submitted to his embrace with composure. She felt it was horridly unromantic. In her girlish dreams she had never thought to be wooed and won in this manner. But she had not been won; she had played for this man's wealth, and now it seemed to be her own; and in the flush of happy triumph which her face now bore, and of which Will was so enamoured, there was more of gratified ambition and revenge than of love.

CHAPTER V.

A WEDDING WITHOUT A BREAKFAST.

A WEEK afterwards, Will and Clara were in London spending money very fast. She was, through the good-natured kindness of her late mistress, staying at Lord Dunkeld's, and sallied forth every day to purchase *trousseau* and pony-carriage, and a hundred knickknacks which she fancied appertained to the state of the *châtelaine* of Hever Court. Will had not felt so happy for a long time, perhaps never before. He was so proud of Clara ; she did him so much credit, saved

him so much trouble, that he became more and more her slave every day. They had only a few days to stay in London—a place which Will hated—as the marriage was to take place at Bingwell during the following week.

Clara thought often of Edward as she drove about the London streets, and perhaps Will did also ; but he never mentioned his brother, and Clara was not anxious to introduce his name.

She was most docile and attentive to Will's behests, though sometimes these were not conveyed in a very gracious or conciliatory manner. But she had found no difficulty in promising that there should be “no fuss” at the wedding, and that “they

should be shot of everybody at the church doors," though she did feel for a moment that this last stipulation would seem very hard to the two old women who had treated them respectively as their own children.

On the morning of the wedding Will's eye still wore a light halo of yellowish green, the departing effects of Nantwich's well-delivered blows. His carriage, which would return with him and his bride, was at the door. As Will had no "best man," he took Mr. Pedder, the butler, who looked a most respectable person. His own desire was only to get the ceremony over as quickly as possible.

At the church Mr. Bustard shook hands and talked gaily with him about the weather,

and Mr. Fipps, who was to "assist" the rector, smiled and said "he should be running after Will soon about his schools;" and Mr. Pitcher, in white gloves with wrinkled fingers far too long, rapped two or three boys' heads by way of punishment for talking too freely of Will's earlier days right under the nose of the Squire.

Presently Mrs. Prickett hove in sight, and the parish clerk was marshalling her into a good seat, to which he considered she was entitled on this occasion.

But she held back.

"No, Mr. Pitcher, I don't see nobody as has a better right to be in the chancel end."

And she took no further notice of her old friend, but made her way up the aisle to-

wards the spot where Will stood awaiting his affianced bride. Mrs. Prickett felt she was quite equal to the occasion, for she wore a new white silk bonnet and a well-preserved blue and green shot silk dress, with a shawl of some light colour that had been her mother's. She felt she was not unworthy of a position behind the Squire.

"Come to see me tied up?" said Will, smiling kindly.

"I'd as lief a been buried as not been here," replied Mrs. Prickett, her eyes wandering over Will's dress. She marvelled at the magic alteration which a few weeks had made in his appearance. She didn't give the West-end tailor sufficient credit for what he could always accomplish with a fine

young fellow for a foundation, who would not be very critical of his bill.

“Here she comes,” exclaimed Mrs. Prickett; adding in a lower key to herself, “and she would be a pretty creetur if she didn’t look so mortal proud.”

Clara was simply dressed: her toilet looked bridal only because it was a little in advance of the season, her pale face expressing resolution rather than happiness. Yet she was happy in her way: happy to escape the thralldom of a meaner life, even to be rid of these faithful friends that surrounded her. By her side walked a heavy-looking man, who was a miller, generally of very jovial aspect; but now he, being Mrs. Smithson’s brother, had been chosen to give away the

bride ; and his face expressed a comical agony, for he watched his every footstep in terror lest he should tread upon Clara's ample skirts. Behind her waddled Mrs. Smithson, gorgeous in the colouring of her dress and of her face, which she was obliged to wipe twice in passing from the door to the altar. Two or three friends made up the rear of the bridal procession, which could not have been better composed to set off Clara's superiority in grace and beauty. That beauty seemed an ample justification of her ambition.

The service proceeded, the morning sun casting rich colours from the painted glass upon the scene.

When Mr. Bustard approached the inquiry

if there was any just cause or impediment to the marriage, Clara's breath came quickly, and she seemed to listen in momentary expectation of some sound. Not that she expected any, but the formal inquiry seemed to be the first word of the service she had heard, and this fell upon her ear as a menace or a threat. Yet, though her heart stood still for a brief pause, Mr. Bustard made no long tarrying, and Clara found herself wed while she was wondering if any one would, or could, or ought to forbid the marriage to proceed.

Then, when she knew it was all over, and she had entered upon a new sphere of wealth and power that no one could take away from her, there came over her a sense

of delight and triumph which was all her own ; for the tears were trickling down her old aunt's rosy cheeks, and Mrs. Prickett was thinking of nothing but her own anxiety to add her name as a witness of the marriage, and the miller had begun to feel hungry, and the rector was thinking of his fee, which was a good one ; while his curate moralised on marriages, and marvelled what Lucy Denman would say to a proposal from himself.

Will felt rather ashamed that he had made no hospitable provision for their friends, and received their congratulations with a somewhat sheepish air ; but his wife rose to the occasion, and said with a circular glance at all, something about " the pleasure

Mr. Frankland and she would have some early day in entertaining their kind friends at Hever Court, which they had not proposed to do to-day as they were going to remain there." And this was delivered with so much kindly yet conscious patronage, that every one present knew, for all the blush that accompanied the little speech, that Clara had at once risen to her new position, and in this solemn half-hour cut away the less glorious memories of the past.

So in the first moment of their married life Will learned his dependence on his wife ; but this was not at all displeasing to him. He knew it would be so, and the submission would save him a great deal of trouble. Already, before he was engaged to her, he

had began to feel his wealth a burden. It would not be so now. Clara, who had never appeared so handsome as she did to-day, would save him all trouble, and then he thought with pleasure how proudly and successfully she would assert and maintain their station in the face of those great neighbours, out of whose society he had been cuffed.

But the first words he spoke to his wife were, as they drove homewards past her old home,—

“D’ye remember that flower for your hair, Clara? I never thought you would marry me then.”

He didn’t intend to remind her of her scornful rejection of the poor man, and her ready acceptance of the same man made

rich. It was only the verbal expression of the self-gratulation with which he hugged his good fortune, in which he thought his wife the best part.

But Clara's mind was more finely tuned, and his remark jarred upon it like a false note. It seemed a reproach made bitter by her own thoughts, in which there was some lurking sense of shame. She looked round at him with a sudden flush, perceptibly angry.

"We are better matched now, Will." She threw herself back upon the cushions of their handsome carriage, inclined to wonder how she could ever have lived at such a place.

It was not a good beginning, nor was it

right that, with her marriage vows but just recorded, Clara should sigh as she did at the remembrance of the camellia and of Edward, for whom, it seemed to her, she had worn it.

She had been unreflecting, but she had never succeeded in deceiving herself. It was not her husband that she loved; yet her husband's feeling towards his half-brother was affectionate compared with the hatred she bore to Edward, for he had scorned her avowal of her love. Would he not feel that she had triumphed, that he had fallen, when he should hear the news of to-day? This was her happiness.

Yet was it a triumph? She thought her husband, cowed by her remark, looked brutally stupid and vulgar. But her face

brightened as they came in sight of Hever Court, and the pretty dappled deer skipped away from before the eyes of their new mistress.

CHAPTER VI.

A BOARD OF DIRECTORS (LIMITED).

THAT class of men of whom it may be said that they could fill, with decided success, two very distinct positions, cannot be numerous; yet it may not have escaped the reader's observation that there are headwaiters who have the physical gifts indispensable to the heaven-born chairman of directors. Blandly conforming to the sensual appetites of the guests at a public dinner, such an one will condescend to bear a tureen of soup, or even a cod's head-and-

shoulders,—the boiled caricature of his own, .
—awing them the while with his superior
manner, and with a serene contempt still
mingled with urbane regard, throwing their
vinous orders from himself to his obedient
and less obese satellites. Perchance the
highly-favoured guest to whom the soup has
not yet arrived, may ponder, as he receives
a plate from his august hands, how that
massive bald-head, with its neatly brushed-
up white whiskers, set in its white un-
rumpled stock, framed, as it were, between
two ridges of uncreasing collar ; how that
portly bust, conspicuous in its snowy mount-
ing of shirt-front and waistcoat, would be-
come the chair of a certain board-room,
where those pudgy hands would wield the

hammer of order, and that stentorian voice put the quavering amendments of less dignified colleagues with so much unctuous decorum.

Of this class was Mr. Timothy Gotobed ; but he had taken what must be called the higher line,—he was a chairman of directors. No company, whether with or without a settling-day, was destitute of solidity while Mr. Gotobed was its chairman, for he was solidity personified. He might have sat for a fancy portrait of the English idea of commercial security ; his creditable features had been represented on canvas many a time, and hung in this, that, or another board-room ; and more than one of these, so the wags of the Stock Exchange said, had found

its way to Wardour Street, there to be sold for a family portrait to any gentleman in search of a highly respectable dining-room pedigree.

Now Mr. Snodgers had the privilege of a long acquaintance with Mr. Gotobed, who did not disregard—perhaps he was not wealthy enough to disregard—the compliments by means of which the financial agent now and then cemented their acquaintance, which was thus one of a mutually beneficial character. The considerations that had induced Mr. Gotobed to accept a seat on the board, and the chairmanship of the directors of the “Iron-Working Company, Limited,” did not appear, but Mr. Snodgers boasted of the fact as the accomplishment of a great

success ; and he even hinted, in a delicate and highly confidential manner, that this one service was a more than sufficient recompense for the modest allotment of five thousand pounds in shares which he was to receive for his services in promoting the formation and establishment of the company.

Of Mr. Batt nothing had been heard, but it was believed that he was by this time in America. Of his debts, however, plenty had been said ; indeed the company, "though well launched," as Mr. Snodgers told his colleagues, "had not floated;" but the directors exhibited a surprising degree of equanimity under the circumstances. The board consisted of Mr. Gotobed, Mr. Snodgers, Mr. Plynlm, who was lighter, physically, by three stones

than the chairman, a coarse, stubbly-haired Welshman, whom many would have taken for the master of a coal brig ; but Mr. Plynlym was a shipowner as well as a mine-owner, and a long-headed man. Mr. Gernet, who, with Edward, made up the remainder of the board, was a tall, spare man, whose sharp features and greedy eyes, always considerably in advance of his body, seemed, to those who knew his avaricious nature, to be craning after profits everywhere and in everything.

Edward had been prevented by illness from attending any of their meetings. He had been for a month confined to his room by an utter prostration of strength, accompanied with painful nervous debility. His

doctor said he had caught cold ; he himself didn't know what was the matter, but he felt very wretched and powerless. Several times he had opened circulars from Mr. Snaggs inviting his attendance, and had thrown them aside with increasing disgust at the entire business, and a suspicion that he should lose all his money. But now he had so far recovered, that, upon receiving one of these which announced "special and urgent" business for the consideration of the board, he was able to get into a cab and drive down to the works.

There could be little in common between him and the men assembled round the baize-covered table, at which Mr. Batt had been wont to transact his business. His first

thought on entering was amazement that he should have become their associate.

The secretary, who looked just as rusty as when he was only a clerk, stumped about to get and place a chair for him, and Mr. Snodgers successively introduced his three colleagues, upon which Mr. Gotobed unctuously patronised "our young friend," as he took the liberty of calling Edward. Mr. Plynlm offered his snuffy hand, and Mr. Gernet coolly stared at Edward, and appeared to be studying his financial capabilities by a close examination of his face.

Pale, handsome, and unsympathising, with a weary look in his eyes which boded ill for the affairs of the company if left to him, Edward sat, while Snaggs mumbled some-

thing which had been announced as the minutes of the last meeting.

“Order for the Chair!” cried Mr. Snodgers, as Mr. Gotobed gave two loud knocks on the table, all which appeared very unnecessary, as there were only four other persons in the room, each of whom was quite willing to listen. The chairman seemed to be inflating himself preparatory to speaking, a process which greatly increased his resemblance to a codfish.

Then in a pompous tone and manner, full of solvency, Mr. Gotobed proceeded to disclose the state of affairs. The nominal value of the shares taken up, including those fully paid up, which had been allotted to the members of the board, was £24,200 ; the liabili-

ties of the company were £41,000; the assets, Mr. Gotobed thought, if carefully—"care-ful-ly"—realised, might be £18,000 or £20,000. "Now, as the share capital of the company," Mr. Gotobed went on to explain, "was £50,000, it was plain that if all had been taken up the business might have been cleared of liabilities and carried on with great advantage to the proprietors; but that, as my friend Mr. Snodgers will explain to the meeting, has not been the case——"

"But," interrupted Edward, and addressing himself to Snodgers, "I understood you that all the shares had been applied for."

"You told me something like that," growled Plynlm; "it looks rascally bad."

"Why, we shan't get ten shillings in the pound," screamed Gernet.

Mr. Snodgers looked quite at ease.

"So they were, in a manner of speaking, all applied for," he said, "but you know they weren't 'placed,' and the Stock Exchange have refused a settling-day. Then of course the bargains were off, and I'm afraid, to tell you the truth, we shan't get rid of many more shares than those at present allotted."

"I don't understand," said Edward.

"You don't look as if you did," replied Plynlym coarsely, before the gentler Snodgers could explain. "Well, then, I'll show you what the rig is. You see, when he," pointing to Snodgers, "wants to catch flats, he gets a lot o' fellers to pretend that they're

flats, so as to pass the bait on to the real flats ; well then, if these sham flats can't catch any real 'uns, they don't want to be took themselves. Now, if there was a settling-day, each one would have to pay up for the bait in his possession ; if there ain't a settling-day he just gives it back to Mr. Snodgers. Now do you see the rig, sir ? I'm about right, ain't I, Snodgers ? ”

“ It's a very coarse way of putting matters,” remarked the chairman.

Edward felt disgusted and ashamed. Disgusted at the open villany of these men, and ashamed to find himself in their company, acting with them. He was in that feeble state of health in which pecuniary difficulties

do not much affect men. He began to see how he had been swindled out of his money ; but even this was better than to have been a gainer in such an affair. "Then I fear I have been the flattest of the flat," was his rejoinder to Mr. Plynym's exposition.

"He! he! he!" laughed Gernet ; "well, that's good, very good."

"Order! order!" said Mr. Gotobed in his best manner. He believed it was closely modelled on the Speaker's tone.

"I don't see what you've got to do with it ; neither you nor him have got a groat in the concern." And Mr. Plynym looked furiously at the chairman and Mr. Snodgers, who immediately rose, as he said, "to order."

"I should like to knock you down to order," growled Plynym.

"He! he!—I wouldn't pick him up. I second that motion," grinned Mr. Gernet.

"I shan't ask more than my rights," and Snodgers as he spoke glanced timidly at Edward and Snaggs, to see if they would defend him in case of need from his irate colleagues. "But you have not heard me out yet: what I propose is that we petition to wind up at once, and divide the assets upon the paid-up share capital."

"There can be no better course," said Mr. Gotobed, who was doing all he could by mere deportment to maintain good feeling among the board.

"What!" exclaimed Plynym, "and you,

you little thief ! to share pound and pound with us !”

“ You agreed to it in the articles of association,” faltered Snodgers, backing his chair from the table, to put more space between Plynym and himself.

“ Ah ! but then you was going to do fine things and you ain’t done them.”

“ I never was treated so disrespectfully at a board—ne-ver !” and Mr. Gotobed blew himself out to his biggest.

“ Wasn’t you ? Well, I’ve been treated worse—I’ve been robbed, and Tim Gotobed was at the bottom of it.”

“ Sir, if you are going to assault me—”

“ Assault you !—you ain’t worth it, you old firkin of foul stuff.”

"Take his words down, Mr. Snaggs; take his words down," screamed Mr. Gotobed. All his dignity was gone. It was the cod-fish boiled. His cheeks hung white and flabby, and his dress seemed "a world too wide" for the portly person who but just now filled it.

"Take that down!" shouted Plynym, dashing the contents of the inkstand over Gotobed's white waistcoat. It was aimed at his face, but he rose up so as to catch it in a long splash over his spotless front.

Trembling with fear, bedabbled with ink, Gotobed was a pitiable object.

At length order was restored. Mr. Gotobed buttoned his coat mournfully over his wounds. "He was not a man," he said, "to nourish anger against any man, and he

hoped Mr. Plynlym would see he had been too hasty." However, the Welshman didn't see, or confess any contrition whatever, but engaged in a private conference with his colleague Gernet. Mr. Snodgers was similarly engaged with the dilapidated chairman, leaving Edward biting the end of a quill, and Mr. Snaggs looking philosophically rusty.

"We can beat 'em if you will vote with us," whispered Plynlym across the table to Edward.

But Edward declined entering into any arrangement to support either couple.

"We've power to add to our number," said Plynlym aloud, quoting from the prospectus. "I move that the three gentlemen

to whom the largest number of shares have been allotted be placed on the board."

Gernet seconded his motion.

Much now depended upon Edward. Snodgers and Gotobed looked imploringly at him, afraid to ask him to vote against Plynlm, yet waiting anxiously for him to speak.

"If you want to get your money back," said Plynlm to him, "you'll vote with us."

Neither Snodgers nor Gotobed dared to canvass for his support.

There was an expression of the deepest scorn on Edward's face as he addressed them, looking from one to the other.

"The only satisfactory reflection that I

can have in connection with this dirty business will be that I have never taken part in any of your proceedings. I must say that I am sincerely glad you have failed in your attempt to impose upon the public. I am bitterly sorry and ashamed that some have already been induced to take shares in a bankrupt concern, with which my name is connected. I need hardly tell you that I shall instantly expose any further attempts in that direction. I resign my seat here, and I shall instruct my solicitor to watch my interests as a shareholder. Good morning, gentlemen." And before any of them replied, Edward had left the room.

Plynlym and Gernet resigned themselves to their fate. They knew they were beaten

now, for Gotobed had as chairman a casting vote.

Mr. Snodgers' motion for winding up the affairs of the company was therefore carried. And he and the majestic Gotobed stood to make a very comfortable sum out of the concern in which everyone else would be a loser, including Mr. Snaggs, to whom the idea of the closing of the company's affairs had just presented itself, and then in a rusty sort of activity he began to think of himself—and the cash-box.

CHAPTER VII.

A BARONET IN RUINS.

IN the front room, upon the first floor of a house in Piccadilly, sat an old man of striking appearance. He was tall and thin ; his dress scrupulously neat and gentlemanlike. His closely-fitting collar bound twice round with a handkerchief, the ends of which were formed into a diminutive bow, betrayed methodical precision of character, and his sharp, intelligent features, which in their clear outline looked younger than his bald head and scanty white hairs, were domi-

nated by restless, fiery eyes, that like the lamps in a beacon, seemed the all-important feature — indeed, the feature which the entire structure was designed to carry.

Strewn about and around him lay newspapers and share-lists. Two or three brokers' circulars lay open upon the table. A file of the *Economist* cumbered a side table, and a well-worn despatch box, full almost to bursting with papers, stood at his elbow. Before his eyes was the monetary intelligence in the leading morning journal, and they seemed fixed upon a particular paragraph which he appeared to be reading again and again, nervously crossing and uncrossing his long thin legs, and shifting about in his chair, as though he wished to regard this

paragraph from every possible point of view. For him the paper seemed to contain no other intelligence worthy of attention.

The paragraph announced a panic among the shareholders of the Merchant Princes Credit Association, Limited, the shares being quoted at an actual discount equivalent to the amount paid upon them, and referred to a mercantile failure for an enormous amount as the cause of this sudden and tremendous depreciation.

Sir John Denman, for he it was, had received a crushing blow in this piece of news, he having made a heavy speculation in the shares of this young and hitherto reputed prosperous association. For years he had been a gambler in public securities,

playing his game upon the broad table of the Stock Exchange, while quietly seated in his own room, which has the great advantage over other tables, that it is not illegal, does not compel late hours, nor lead to those personal conflicts which are too frequently the sequel of such comparatively paltry games as rouge-et-noir and écarté.

Family differences and his own peculiar temperament had led Sir John to a solitary life in London, where he had become engrossed in constant monetary speculation. Proud, shy, and nervous, he was very ill-fitted for the game he spent his existence in playing. By nature unsympathising, his pursuits made him still more so. He seemed to shrink from contact with the world, and

to enjoy nothing but the excitement of his financial ventures. Hitherto he had speculated with varying success, never risking a serious stake in one undertaking. But the marvellous success which the new finance companies seemed to have accomplished, had unsettled his caution, and he had made an all-important venture in the shares of the "Merchant Princes." His restless movements, his eyes fixed in seeming fascination upon the newspaper, were the only signs that betrayed a loss which might prove ruinous. For it was evident that a further call upon the shares would at once be made, and Sir John knew perfectly well that they were at present quite unsaleable.

He was making mental calculations, with

his eyes still fixed on the paper, when his man entered the room with an enamelled card, closely followed by Mr. Gribble, whose name and profession were inscribed upon it in flowing letters.

“You announce yourself, I see, Mr. Gribble,” said Sir John, with dry hauteur; “but sit down and tell me to what circumstance I am indebted for the honour of your early visit.”

Whenever Mr. Gribble wished to see anyone, especially on money matters, he always made a point of following his card pretty closely. He bore Sir John’s rebuke with a complacency which annoyed him immensely.

“What may you please to want with me, sir?” asked the baronet, snappishly.

“Oh, I want nothing,” replied Gribble, taking up his hat as if to leave the room. “I only came to tell you that, as the interest is still unpaid, my client has instructed me to foreclose and take possession of Thistlewood.”

Tears of blood would not have ill-expressed the agony of mind which Sir John Denman was enduring.

“Your client,” he said ; his lips were pale, but there was no faltering in his eyes, —“I thought it was understood that the mortgage was to remain in your own name. But probably you do not consider yourself bound by the mere word of a gentleman ; pray excuse me for assuming the contrary for one moment.”

Gribble smiled a bow of mock solemnity in acknowledgment of the scornful sneer with which Sir John uttered these words.

“Well, so it does, Sir John,” he replied, “in point of fact ; only my friend and client, Mr. William Frankland, stands in for the five thousand, and he is pressing me for the interest ; you may put it that way if you like, it comes to the same thing.”

This mortgage had a curious history, which at one time, at all events, was known only to the two persons now in this room. In the earliest days of Mr. Gribble’s professional career, three bills of one thousand pounds each had found their way into his cash-box, drawn by Arthur Denman, Sir John’s only son, and accepted by Lord

Nantwich. Probably Gribble had not become in part owner of these pieces of paper until he had discovered that they were of no value—in fact, until he had ascertained that Nantwich's signature was a clumsy forgery, but he knew this before Arthur Denman died by the discharge of his gun, while crossing a hedge in a day's partridge shooting. Gribble and a few other persons always believed that the stout twig which pulled the fatal trigger was adjusted by the hand of a determined and guilty suicide ; but it was not their interest to question the coroner's verdict of accidental death.

In these pieces of paper Mr. Gribble discerned a value which he resolved to turn to his own advantage. He had not the least

doubt in his own mind that Arthur Denman, pressed by debt, and reckless of consequences, had forged Lord Nantwich's acceptance to these bills, and then committed suicide from fear of exposure and punishment. But Gribble had been an indirect agent in this catastrophe; for upon obtaining possession of the bills, their true character being made known to him by the money-lender, who was his confederate in the transaction, he had at once found out Sir John Denman, and had so worked upon the old man's sensitive family pride that he had given him this mortgage upon the Thistlewood estate in consideration of Gribble's agreeing to destroy the bills. The arrangement had been fully carried out, and

when Sir John had with trembling hands destroyed the evidences of his son's criminality, he knew that his family estate was mortgaged up to the full value of everything he possessed there, including stock and furniture, while his honour was saved from an indelible public stain. For though he reflected that Lord Nantwich must be aware of the forgery and suspect the forger, yet he knew that Nantwich would not speak of his suspicions. Shortly after the affair was concluded, Arthur applied to his father for money, which had been a very common occurrence, and Sir John, with all the acrimonious precision of which he was capable, narrated what had passed between Gribble and himself, and dismissed his son, declaring

that he would never again give him pecuniary assistance, nor shield him from the danger of punishment.

A short time afterwards Arthur Denman committed suicide, having first written a letter full of loving penitence to his mother, who doated upon him. This letter, which had merely alluded in general terms to his difficulties, had created great ill-feeling between Sir John and Lady Denman. She felt that her husband had denied their son money in order to waste it upon his own financial schemes. And Sir John was never able to drive this unjust suspicion from her mind, for he was too proud, and no want of sympathy led him to tell the truth.

He had been unable to pay the interest on

this mortgage, and according to its covenants Gribble had by this default acquired the right to take possession of Thistlewood. Perhaps at any other time Sir John would have been able so far to lay aside his pride as to ask for time from the attorney. Yet he would rather have bled for payment than have so humbled himself, if Gribble would have accepted any such discharge. Now, however, with inevitable ruin before him, Sir John felt far less concern about the matter. At the most, it could only be a race between his creditors which should enter the first appearance upon his family estate. Certainly he would not have preferred that Gribble should be the first, but he never felt less disposed to ask any for-

bearance from a man whose vulgarity and presumption were so disgusting to his refined taste.

“ You must take what course you please, sir. I regret I have not the means at hand of discharging my debt, nor can I say that I am likely to be in a position to do so at any early period.” Nothing could exceed the dignity and self-control with which Sir John made this confession.

But when Gribble had left the room, purposing, as Sir John well knew, immediately to take possession, and, as he had power, to distrain upon and sell off the household furniture at Thistlewood, the old man threw himself upon his couch, and the lines in his face seemed visibly to grow deeper in his

tearless agony, in which he more than once felt a strong impulse to follow the example of his unhappy son, and put an end to his existence ; he would have yielded to the temptation, which was so strong upon him that he seemed to see through door and case the very shape and substance of his razor, had it not been for loving thoughts of his daughter Lucy, and recollection of her childish face, so pure and sinless, which seemed now to be regarding him.

CHAPTER VIII.

EXECUTION AT THISTLEWOOD.

“I SHALL get quite a name for turning parties out of their property in this part of the world.”

It was Gribble who made this ill-omened speech to Lady Denman and Lucy directly after his unexpected arrival, and announcement of the occupation which Messrs. Bumby and Cursitor, the sheriff's officers who accompanied him, were about to make at Thistlewood.

The ladies had, however, been spared from

the shock in all the rudeness which Mr. Gribble would have given to it, by a short note from Sir John, which had arrived the same morning, telling Lady Denman that such an event was to be expected, and that he would endeavour to be at Thistlewood in the course of the day.

The intelligence had been a great shock to them. Neither Lucy nor her mother had more than the vaguest idea of monetary difficulties, and now that these rude men had come, as it seemed, to take their home and all its treasures away from them, their position appeared very dreadful. Lady Denman knew much of her husband's occupations, although there was so little sympathy between them ; but though she was

aware he had not been a very successful speculator, yet she believed him to be an astute and safe player at the game which so much engrossed him.

Naturally a very selfish woman, she felt no concern for Sir John in his difficulties; she was possessed with an angry feeling towards him, whom she regarded as having staked her position and home on some gambling enterprise—and lost.

“It’s only a little formality, you know, my lady,” said Gribble, pointing to the two men who were standing in the hall, Bumby looking round upon the pictures and furniture, pasting imaginary labels in the corners of the gilt frames, nodding his head as he lotted them out for an imaginary sale, while

his colleague, whose mind was not so progressive, occupied himself in holding his battered hat in different positions, as though he felt somewhat nervous in his occupation.

“Are those horrid men to stay here then?” asked Lady Denman.

Lucy’s lovely face, so pathetic in her unselfish anxiety for her father and mother, had affected Gribble, and made him anxious to put himself to the best advantage in his disagreeable position. He said that Cursitor could sit in the hall, “where he’d look as humble as a charity-boy, and be as quiet as a mouse,” while Bumby, the business-like, might perhaps be accommodated somewhere in the servants’ offices, “where he’d be quite out of everybody’s way.”

"As for me, my lady, I'm only here as Mr. William Frankland's lawyer—very unpleasant—business is business—duty to perform—can't help myself." And Gribble tried to look as though he would if he could.

"Mr. Frankland!" exclaimed Lady Denman. "Is it he who insults us by this visit? I had thought better of him."

Gribble at once understood by this remark and the blush he saw on Lucy's face, that she had not told her mother of the scene which had taken place at Dropton. He glanced at Lucy with a smirk of confidence, which meant that he and she knew all about Will's regard towards her mother and herself.

"If you propose to await Sir John Denman's arrival, he will be here in a few

minutes ; the carriage has gone to meet him at the railway-station," said Lady Denman, hoping to relieve herself of the necessity of any longer parley with Gribble.

The lawyer did not propose to await the arrival of Sir John ; indeed, he rather hastily pleaded an engagement with "his client, Mr. Frankland," and after making what he thought were most elegant bows to the ladies, and addressing a few words of caution in a low voice to the penitent-looking bailiff, Mr. Cursitor, Gribble took his departure.

Sir John Denman approached his house with but few of the emotions which would seem natural to his position. He had been some time absent, but he experienced no delight in returning, no longing, lingering love

for the place he was about to lose. It was some time since he had seen his wife and daughter, but he felt no anxiety to meet them ; he loved his daughter as much as it was possible for him to love anyone, but then in his mind she was always associated with her mother, for whom he had no love at all.

The deep, incurable wound that his self-pride had sustained might even be seen in his feebleness ; he was scarcely able to lift his feet upon the carriage-steps, and his face looked wan and haggard. Like some alchemist disturbed in his philosophic search after gold by the call of family duties which he will not allow himself to neglect, duties by which his crucibles had been overturned, his

fires put out, his laboratory destroyed ; in such a frame of mind, Sir John had come towards Thistlewood.

He did not care for the place, it had no delights for him. He didn't think much of his wife's loss of comfort or of Lucy's, for they were not in his heart. But if it had been in his nature to shed tears, this broken old man would have wept at the humiliation of his name, at the check to his pursuits. He saw before him nothing but a few years of aged life dependent on his wife's small private fortune, and the bitterness of death seemed vanishing in prospect of so much misery.

His step in the doorway fell not like that of ownership. Thistlewood had not for a

long time been "home" to him. Now that he must give it up, he felt that reluctant affection for the place which the gambler feels for the metal and the paper of the great stake as it leaves his unwilling hands in payment of his final debt. This he experienced, but nothing more. He had hardly crossed the threshold when Lucy met him.

Her quick, joyful step, her impulse to embrace her father, were checked by Sir John's cool reception.

Yet his face twitched and his lips quivered as they touched her forehead.

"Where's Lady Denman, my dear?" he asked.

Lucy conducted him to her mother, who

was crying and sobbing in an excited manner. She raised her head on seeing Sir John enter the room, but it was only to say :

“ Oh ! John—Sir John !—see what— you have—brought us to ! ”

“ I had no choice in the matter,” he replied, with a bitter smile, as he sank into a chair, apparently exhausted.

“ Did you put us in the dice-box and play for our happiness or misery ?—or are we the victims of one of your less reputable financial speculations ? ”

“ Mamma ! ” It was all Lucy could say in deprecation of her mother’s selfish anger. Nothing could be more irritating than the tone and look with which Lady Denman had made this remark. Neither she nor her

husband appreciated the anguish which Lucy suffered in bewildered anxiety to make any sacrifice of herself for their mutual happiness. Sir John heard his wife's sarcasm with his head hanging down, and felt its remorseless and unpitiful sting in his heart.

“It is the price of your son's redemption from the gallows—or worse!”

The words had scarcely left his mouth when Sir John felt as though he had been guilty of striking his wife. He saw her face turn pale, and the look of querulous anger change to one of abject terror and pitiful anguish.

“What!” she screamed, as Lucy hastened to support her, fearing she would faint.

He wished she had not dragged the

shameful story from him. She would have lived and died happier if she had never known it. The injustice she had done him since Arthur's death had never been hard to bear when he remembered how he could remove it by telling her the whole truth. But he had long since resolved to bear this great shame and sorrow alone, and now she had forced it from him by her cruel words, so cruel he felt in their untimely injustice.

Slowly,—for his emotions had increased his difficulty of breathing,—he told his wife how he had purchased Gribble's silence with the mortgage he was now foreclosing, but he was honest enough to add an account of other difficulties which had completed his ruin.

His wife's eyes were regarding him with a stony stare, but when he ceased speaking they closed, and she fell back into Lucy's arms, pale as death, and apparently in death.

When she revived she drew Sir John's face down to hers and kissed him.

"We must leave here, then?" she murmured faintly.

"Yes."

"We shall be together—always?" and she feebly pressed Sir John's hand in hers.

"Yes—always—if you will let me," replied the old man, tenderly, yet with a shamed look, as he thought he must in future be dependent on his wife.

Lady Denman lay on a couch, her hand

in Sir John's, when Lord Nantwich was announced.

"He will not misunderstand if we are engaged," said Lucy, seeing a look of indecision in her father's face. She felt, after what she had heard, it would be impossible for her to receive Nantwich. The outline of the story of Arthur's crime she had already heard from William Frankland, who led her to suppose that he had actual proof of it, and that he and his informant alone were cognisant of it; but she had no idea that Nantwich was a partner in the dreadful secret, still less that it was his name which her brother had forged.

But her father insisted that Lucy should see him, and Lady Denman, with an anxious

look, seconded Sir John. Perhaps they both hoped that Nantwich would ask Lucy to be his wife; but Sir John put it to his daughter that her duty and their duty was to bear themselves bravely in their troubles, and not to admit to their friends that they were overwhelmed and broken down by their misfortunes.

But for all this, it was with a sad face and a heavy heart that Lucy moved towards the drawing-room.

"Mamma was very unwell," she said, in reply to Lord Nantwich's inquiry,—an answer which, she observed, did not seem altogether to surprise him.

Lucy felt quite incapable of maintaining a conversation, and Nantwich seemed to be

forcing their talk with the most commonplace remarks, to which she replied in monosyllables.

She felt she was appearing very stupid, and half wished he could have known how much cause she had for grief. She had not the least idea that his heart was melting with sympathy for her, that her face, more lovely than ever in its pensive sadness, was confusing his clear brain and thwarting the purposes of his visit.

"Is change of air recommended for Lady Denman?" he hazarded.

"I think we shall soon be leaving here."

She drooped her eyes, feeling that in saying this she was equivocating, hiding

the stern necessity that forced them from home under a paltry subterfuge. And Nantwich was shifting in his chair, suffering acutely from loss of confidence in himself, he—who had known himself equal to any situation.

“Miss Denman,” he said, “may I consider myself your friend?”

“Oh yes!” Lucy looked up at him frankly, yet with some surprise. Then she blushed deeply, thinking there had been needless warmth in her acceptance of him as her friend. But was she not very lonely, and in need of friendship, and had he not been generous, so generous to Arthur’s fault? Yet though she thus excused herself, her heart beat with anxiety to hear what it

was that Nantwich prefaced in this extraordinary manner.

“I came here to-day to entreat you to allow me the privileges of a friend—to let me help you.”

“Then you know what has happened?” said Lucy, her lip trembling and her bosom heaving with excitement, which she had hitherto with so much difficulty restrained.

“I think I do. It appears that Mr. William Frankland, or some one connected with him, has spoken freely of Sir John’s embarrassments, and so his misfortunes came to my ears. I’m but a clumsy diplomatist, Miss Denman.”

Lucy was obliged to turn away from him to hide the tears she struggled in vain to

keep back. Badly as he felt he had offered his assistance, Nantwich had determined to subdue the admiration he felt for Lucy; it should not, at all events, be master of him in this interview. He didn't think he loved her, he did not believe in love; but he admired no living woman so much. It had crossed his mind that if ever he married he should like to marry her. But then—he had no serious intention of marriage.

He was a man of the world, but he felt himself thoroughly unequal to his present situation. Here was this lovely, gentle girl in tears and trouble about affairs which, after all, had, as he believed, for their foundation nothing but money, and he who would rejoice to pour out his wealth in her

service stood helpless beside her. For her sake he would not to-day have passed beyond the limits of friendship, had not her tears over-mastered his resolve.

He took the hand which hung by her side, and looking round into her face, said, in a low, determined voice,—

“Miss Denman!—Lucy! Give me the precious right to help you and yours: be my wife!”

She smiled on him through her tears, not withdrawing her hand,—

“How good you are, Lord Nantwich. Let me remain your friend; it is better so.” Then she withdrew her hand from his.

“For you, perhaps. But must it be so?”

Another man would have pressed his suit ; but to raise a question in Nantwich's mind was to make him uncertain of his intention, and impotent of following it up without further reflection. He read, too, in her innocent, artless treatment of his offer that she did not love him.

"You must prove your words," he said, "by allowing me to help you."

Lucy was thinking what she should do, half resolved to tell him everything, half fearful of embarrassing herself and offending her father by doing so, when the door opened and Sir John himself entered the room.

She was relieved, but Nantwich was much surprised at her father's appearance, for he

had no knowledge that Sir John was in the house.

“So glad to see you,” said the baronet.
“It has been one of the miseries of my life to lose the society of my Hertfordshire neighbours.”

“And their misfortune to see so little of you, Sir John.”

“Well, well, you are very kind ; and now I have come to take my wife and daughter away.”

There was a curious expression on Sir John's face as he made this remark. He was uncertain how much Lucy had told Nantwich, or how much he had guessed with regard to the cause of their leaving Thistlewood.

“Will nothing make you abandon this intention, Sir John, so fatal to the happiness of the neighbourhood?”

“Nothing—that I know of, my lord ; but I assure you it is painful to myself and to us all.”

“Lord Nantwich knows what has happened to us ; the losses which compel us to leave here, papa,” said Lucy, in order that the gentlemen might understand each other.

“And begs you will do him the honour to consider him your friend in this difficulty,” said Nantwich, with a smile full of kindness and void entirely of self-conscious charity.

Sir John covered his face with his trembling hands. It was some time before he could speak. In truth he was sustaining

and defeating a sore temptation. On the one hand it seemed to him that he might accept this generous young man's assistance, and with that might gain sufficient by speculation to pay his debts and return the kindly loan. But his better judgment and his sense of honour told him how small was the hope that he could offer of repayment, how large a sum his debts alone would swallow, how destitute he was of anything he could offer as security : and then, again, it seemed to him an already incurred disgrace that this man, he who must be cognisant of his son's disgrace, should be offering him money. No ! whatever his difficulties might force him to do, he would never borrow of Nantwich.

"My lord, I am overwhelmed by your goodness," he said, in a feeble, broken voice.

"Pray, don't: I shall be quite unhappy if you refuse my help; in fact, you must not."

"You have been the guardian of my honour. How can I ever repay your forbearance to my poor boy. But I will not increase the debt."

Nantwich saw in a moment by a glance at Lucy's face that she knew the circumstances to which her father alluded. All the merit he could claim was that he had never spoken to anyone of Arthur Denman's forgery of his name. But he was not by nature a babbler, and this didn't appear to Nantwich to entitle him to much merit after all. Besides, he only

suspected Arthur of the forgery, as he was interested in the bills ; the crime had never been brought home to him, and therefore no one was entitled to speak of it as his crime, especially now that he was dead. Nantwich looked pained and embarrassed by Sir John's reference to this distressing affair ; then suddenly his face brightened, as if, out of it, had sprung some cheerful thought.

"Your remark relieves me of a difficulty I have felt for years, Sir John. I have no merit in the matter. Indeed, I think I have done wrong."

Sir John and Lucy fixed their attention upon him.

"After Arthur's death, who, you know, was an intimate associate of mine, I made

inquiry about some bills amounting to £3000 upon which my name had been subscribed. I repudiated them as—forgeries, when they were presented to me for payment; but after Arthur's death I made inquiry about them, and discovered that you had discharged and destroyed them."

"Yes, destroyed them," said Sir John, mechanically; then he added, in a testy voice, "we need not revive the subject, I think."

"But," continued Nantwich, "I contend that it was my duty—I might say, my privilege—to have done this. Arthur, who I know was in great straits at the time, on account of heavy play debts, may have been deceived by some rogue who forged my

signature to these bills, and may have died believing that his embarrassments were caused by what he may have regarded as my refusal to acknowledge my own handwriting. You know how these things are done for one another by young men about town ; you know, too, his sensitive nature—how, if such had been the case, he would have shrunk from putting direct questions to me upon the subject. If Arthur believed for a moment that the acceptance was my own signature I have the right, not you, to discharge those bills ; I consider it my duty to my poor friend, and you, Sir John, must permit me to repay you the £3000 which I consider you have advanced on my account.”

As Nantwich looked to Sir John for his reply, he met Lucy's eyes with an expression which he would have thought very cheap at £3000. Lucy was filled with hopeful gladness at the thought of removing the hateful stain from her brother's memory, and admiration for Nantwich, who had thus thrown a new light upon the circumstances, and whose whole conduct had been so generous.

To Sir John the temptation was awful, but he steeled himself to resist it. His whole frame shook, and as he caught Nantwich's hand, the young peer thought he wished to steady himself against some approaching fit or physical seizure.

He drew Nantwich from his chair, and, tottering towards the window, leaning heavily

on his shoulder, said in a voice sufficiently low, that Lucy could not overhear him,—

“He confessed to me his crime, my lord. Leave us in our misery.”

Sir John seemed impatient to be left alone, and Nantwich, seeing that he could do nothing for them at present, made his adieux and quitted Thistlewood.

CHAPTER IX.

EDWARD HEARS SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE.

SCARCELY three months had passed since the meeting of the directors of the Iron-Working Company, Limited, which had resulted in the triumph of Gotobed and Snodgers, when Edward found himself "in difficulties." The company was in process of winding-up; but when this was accomplished, and no one knew how long the process might last, he had little hope that he should regain a sixpence of his money.

He had gathered this much information from inquiry; he had also learned that Snaggs had made some provision for himself by eloping with the cash-box, containing about a hundred pounds, and had not since been heard of.

He became reconciled to the loss, but unfortunately he was too ill to make any effort to earn money, though he foresaw that he could not continue to live in London unless he did so, for the income from his farm near Hever Court was insufficient for his support.

The costly experience he had already gained made him distrustful of himself. His breeding and bringing-up had not fitted him for a hand-to-hand fight for wealth in London. He felt horribly, painfully at the

mercy of sharpers and rogues ; his health seemed completely broken down ; he looked thin and flaccid, his eyes dull. What hope remained for him ? This was his trouble. He felt beaten in the race of life, worsted, distanced ; his nerves seemed shattered, and his hopes destroyed.

Why should he try again ? If he cast his eye—as he did now and then in a hopeless sort of way—over the advertisements of the *Times*, he felt that to accept any of their inviting professions would only be to court a still greater downfall. No ! he must accept defeat, and suffer himself to be put aside as a failure, to live or die as he might, with no one to care which.

Was it a comfort to him to read of Sir John Denman's insolvency? Perhaps it was. He thought it brought Lucy one step nearer to himself. Had it been possible that she should be in a position to need assistance, then he thought he could act, and could succeed, but he had always heard that Lady Denman had a large private fortune, besides a handsome settlement, and he presumed that Sir John's insolvency would make no difference in their style or place of living.

With these thoughts he was greatly surprised, one day, while sauntering through Hyde Park, to see Lucy sitting on a bench with her hand in that of an old man, whom he at once took to be her father. He had seen Sir John but very few times in his life,

yet if this were he, his recent troubles must indeed have bowed him.

For a moment Edward stood still,—felt his health and strength return to him, and seemed to forget everything that had happened since he was dispossessed of Hever Court; and Lucy, unconscious of his gaze, looking so fresh and pretty in her light morning toilette, had her eyes fixed with tender solicitude on her father, whose lips were moving quickly, while he stared vaguely before him at no object in particular. Then Edward moved towards her, and she saw him raising his hat.

She blushed as she gave him her left hand, looking at the right to imply that she could not withdraw it from her father.

"I am so glad to see you," she said; "I've been hoping we should meet you ever since we came to London." And Lucy made room for Edward to sit down beside her.

"Poor papa,"—she continued, by way of explanation, for Edward glanced at Sir John, who didn't seem to recognise him—"has been very ill; he has had a great deal of trouble, and—and it has affected his head. This is Mr. Frankland, papa, dear."

"Oh! yes, I know," mumbled Sir John; "we were at college together."

"No, papa dear, this is his son, Mr. Edward Frankland."

"His son! He's come to take you away!" The old man tightened his hold upon her hand, and looked piteously in her face. "We

used to talk about your marrying him ; but you won't leave me, Lucy ?”

“ No, never, dear papa !” she replied.

Then he sunk back in quietude, and Lucy turned towards Edward.

“ Do you know we have been ruined !— We have had to leave Thistlewood, to sell all the dear old things there ; and now we are in lodgings at Bayswater ; and we are so poor.”

Lucy's poverty seemed to be almost a source of satisfaction to her ; certainly there was nothing despondent in her tone. She spoke in just the same sweet, soft, happy voice that he had loved so well to hear in their rides and meetings about their Hertfordshire homes.

"I had no idea of this," said Edward, aghast at the troubles of which Lucy spoke so cheerfully.

"I'm so glad you had not; you would have been troubled if you had known at the time."

"But can nothing now be done? Sir John's affairs——"

"Oh dear no! Papa has lost everything; indeed I fear more than he had,—very much more. But the nicest thing happened," she continued, "about some of mamma's and my little household treasures. Of course we grieved to part with them very much, and perhaps with mamma's income we might have bought them; but we thought it prudent not to do so. Well, we had not been

long in London before a cart came up to our lodgings and discharged so many of our old treasures, including my piano and mamma's arm-chair. Wasn't it nice? We made inquiries to find out our benefactor, but could learn nothing more than that they were bought at the sale by a Mr. Carter, who, the man said, 'never let a lot go once he began to bid for it.'

"How kind!—how very kind! Whom do you suspect?"

"It is hardly fair to guess, is it?" said Lucy, blushing and laughing. "If you had been at Bingwell, I should have suspected you, Mr. Frankland. But now tell me your news; we have both lost our homes."

"My story is very short," said Edward,

with despondency; "the history of downhill, Miss Denman, and defeat and failure."

"No, I hope not. You are not well, I see that."

"I declare this is the first happy moment I have had since I left Hever."

"Oh! how sad."

"Had I been there still I might have helped you to keep Thistlewood. But you are superior to these conditions. As for me, I confess the loss of them has almost crushed me."

"You do yourself injustice."

"I am glad you think so," replied Edward, dolefully.

"Of course," added Lucy, "it is hard to lose one's home, and all that that implies."

"I hate myself for these regrets, which seem so selfish; yet looking back on the possession of wealth, it does appear a very paradise of possibilities."

"Yes, that is the delight of being rich."

"To live above the sordid cares of life; to avoid contact with mean, covetous natures,—free at least to choose your own society; to live the highest life. That is to be rich."

"I don't agree with you, Mr. Frankland; all the poor are not dependent, nor unhappy, and all the rich are not independent, nor are they contented."

"Perhaps I talk a little wildly; but I have fallen among thieves lately. I thought

to increase my fortune, and instead of that lost it entirely."

"How very cruel! What will you do?"

Lucy's eyes looked upon him, full of sympathy, thoughtless of her own troubles.

"That's my great difficulty. The doctors say I must have country air; but one can't grow rich upon that." Edward smiled faintly. "I have a small farm near Hever, and I think of living there for a time, and then, when I get strong again, of selling the farm and going to the bar."

"And becoming a judge! as I am certain you would."

"I think I could gain some success," said Edward, his face brightening with a hopeful

flush, "if you would give me the motive power, Lucy."

"I! how can I?" she asked, reddening at the same time with a consciousness in seeming contradiction to her words,

"How can you? I could do anything!—yes, anything! if the reward of your love awaited my success. Lucy, you don't think so badly of me as to suppose that now, in your presence, I would deplore the loss of my wealth for my own sake. I valued it, I would regain it, only to be more worthy of you. To think now upon the happiness it would have been to give it all to you, makes me miserable to have lost it. I could live upon the most distant hope, Lucy. I deserve no more. Give it me for pity's sake,"

"We will hope together," replied Lucy, as with tears gathering in her eyes she put her hand in his.

So they sat silent for some seconds, till Lucy said, lifting her blushing face and looking from Edward to her father, who sat sleeping by her side,

"You will remember, Edward, that my first duty is here. We have been so little together hitherto; and now poor dear papa needs my care so much, and I am so happy to be with him, that I could almost rejoice in our recent misfortunes had they not caused his illness."

"I am your slave—your disciple, dearest." Edward still held the little gloved hand, and emphasised his words with pressing it. "I

can hardly believe in my happiness, Lucy. You do love me?"

Some happy affirmative sign reassured him.

"And now," said Lucy, "if you carry out your intention of going to your farm, we shall not be far distant from each other, for papa's physician has said that he must have country air and quiet. So in a fortnight we are going to take possession of a small house belonging to mamma's family at Singlewell, which you know is on the Hertford road, not more than ten miles from Bingwell."

"Ten miles seems an awful gulf, now that I am unable to walk half the distance and have no horse."

"You dissatisfied boy! you would rather

we were at Singlewell than here, would you not?"

"Where you are, dearest, is the place I prefer to all others; and to be ten miles from that place is certainly a less evil than to have thirty miles between us."

Sir John was now awake, and looking at them with a smile, wagged his head.

"Ah, ah, perhaps the best thing an old gentleman can do is to go to sleep, under the circumstances." Then he whispered in his daughter's ear, "We must have the merry-making at Thistlewood, Lucy."

"Poor papa," she sighed, as they prepared to walk homewards; "perhaps he is happier in his ignorance of all that has happened."

CHAPTER X.

ARCADES AMBO.

MR. SNODGERS was often rallied by his City friends upon having made a good thing out of the Iron Working Company (Limited), which he always appeared to regard as a testimony to his professional skill, though he usually made reference to some tightness in the money market as having been the sole cause of its suspension. Keenly following the process of winding up, he had been brought in contact with Mr. Gribble, in his capacity as solicitor to the runaway Mr. Batt.

In the roundabout way he knew so well how to employ, Mr. Snodgers no sooner found himself alone with Mr. Gribble, than he began to question him as to the reason for his sudden flight from Edward Frankland and himself on the day of their first meeting with Mr. Batt at the works.

Nothing loth to tell a story so much to his credit as an attorney, Mr. Gribble had given to the financial agent a brief outline of the proceedings by means of which he had succeeded in dispossessing Edward of his estate, and placing Will there in his stead.

Mr. Snodgers had appeared strangely, deeply interested, and had evidently tried, but without success, to conceal his concern

from Gribble. The attorney no sooner perceived this than, supposing that Snodgers had some previous knowledge of the Frankland family, and intended for his own benefit to re-open the case, he refused to enter into further detail unless Snodgers explained the meaning of his ejaculations. But the financial agent appeared to have heard nearly all that he wished to know, and left Mr. Gribble writhing with suspicion and distrust, while he himself only looked rather more busy than when he entered the lawyer's office ; in fact any one who knew Snodgers very well would have supposed that he had only just undertaken the active promotion of another limited company, and had every prospect of floating it successfully..

But Mr. Snodgers did not appear to regard this misunderstanding as any bar to their further acquaintance, for a few days after he had received this information he was again at Mr. Gribble's office in Chancery Lane.

Gribble was talking to his clerk as Snodgers entered, so they walked together into the private room.

Snodgers was the first to speak.

Gribble had thrown himself into his chair and regarded Snodgers with a most cynical smile of palpable unbelief. It was a very ugly smile indeed, and expressed most plainly, "I shall not believe a word you say unless I see its motive in your own self-interest."

But Mr. Snodgers plumed himself upon

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going "straight to the point," and to it he went.

"I've been thinking about this affair of Frankland's," he said; "it seems to me to be a very ugly business—a—very—ugly—business indeed."

Mr. Gribble, translating this into language of a precisely opposite meaning, congratulated himself that he and not Snodgers had the handling of the affair. Besides, he had made a thousand pounds out of it with very little trouble.

"I've been to the church and examined the registry," continued Snodgers in a deliberate and dogged voice.

"The deuce you have!—what church?"
The smile was transferred from the lawyer

to the agent, for Gribble had dropped his guard.

“Why, the church you directed me to; where John Frankland and Amy—let me see,” and Snodgers leered at Gribble, “was it Amy?—yes, *Amy* Campbell,—were married.”

The shot had told, and the lawyer looked anxiously uncomfortable.

“I directed you to no church.”

“Well, you said the certificate was found at some church in the west of London, and that was near enough for me.”

Gribble looked dismayed. He saw that his suspicions of his visitor were well-founded. He was no longer certain which of them knew the most about the Frankland affair.

"You didn't come, Mr. Snodgers," he said, with ill-assumed boldness, "to tell me that."

"Yes I did—I did indeed, and to ask you to tell me a little more. I think I know something of these people. Could you tell me where the property lies?"

"Why should I?"

Snodgers shrugged his shoulders with imperturbable self-possession.

"Well, I don't know," he said: "it might make business."

"Might make mischief, perhaps?"

"That's what lawyers live by, I think, he! he! he!" laughed Snodgers. "It couldn't hurt us, could it?"

"How do I know what game you are up

to ? ” replied Gribble, his eyes falling before the malicious smile with which the agent shot the words “could it” at him.

“Well then, I’ll tell you,” said Snodgers, seating himself more at ease, and fixing his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, a posture intended to represent frankness and candour. “I think I’m in a position to prove that that register has been fraudulently tampered with. Why, that doesn’t spoil your game, does it?” he continued, with a taunting smile, seeing the expression of Gribble’s face change suddenly.

“Well, you see, it might upset my client,” said the lawyer, hesitatingly.

“Never mind about him ; let me finish my story first. To cut a long story short, I

was present at that wedding, Mr. Gribble, and I was under the impression that my name was in the registry, and now I want your help to find out who made that little alteration in it."

"What alteration?" Gribble's face was pale and his voice impatient.

"Oh! you don't know—I forgot. Well, you see, it wasn't *Amy* Campbell that was married; it was *Ann* Campbell, and somebody, for his own reasons, doubtless, has turned the second 'n' into a 'y.' Now do you see what I'm driving at?"

"No, I'll be hanged if I do," replied Gribble, obstinately; but though his face was pale and his eyes full of covert, malignant anger, he was in thought busily con-

necting these disclosures with their chain of circumstances, and working out problems in which his self-interest was the point to be gained.

“I can’t give you my eyes,” said Snodgers, laughing quietly, “but I’ll tell you what you are thinking about. You are thinking how my knowledge of this will affect your client’s hold upon his estate, and how I shall proceed to carry my knowledge to the best market ; for, you see, there *is* a choice of markets ; and then you’re thinking that you know one thing that I don’t, and that is, who made these little alterations.”

“It’s a lie.”

But Snodgers knew his man, and was not afraid of rude words.

"Well, you ought to know; for your hand did it, Mr. Gribble, as sure as mine is on your table."

"You dare to repeat that statement before my clerk," blustered the lawyer, laying his hand on his call-bell.

"Ring away," said Snodgers, defiantly. "You know we shall have your client in the witness-box, and it might come out that you got something comfortable out of the affair. Perhaps you did."

Mr. Gribble did not ring. Probably he thought that Mr. Snodgers would not hesitate to repeat the accusation before his clerk, and he had scarcely a proper confidence in the result of an action for defamation.

He rubbed his face with his large, bony

hand, unconsciously imitating the action of a cat. He felt that Snodgers had him in a corner, and that the agent knew it.

"I hope I'm too good a lawyer to like quarrelling on my own account," he said, with a poor attempt to be funny; "can't we play together, Mr. Snodgers?"

But a wheedling tone was thrown away upon the financial agent, who grew bolder with his success.

"Why should we, man alive, when I've got all the trumps? why, what can you do?" He seemed to be jeering the attorney. "Your hands are tied; you can't go to either party to make your terms—you know you can't—even supposing you did know all the history of this certificate."

"Then what are you here for?" whined Gribble.

"Here! me here! well, I'm here to ask you to tell me all about this property—where it is, what's its worth, and so forth; and if you won't tell me in a plain, pleasant way, then I'm here to tell you about that little slip of your pen in that register—no, no, it's no use your saying you didn't do it—and to see then if you will give me the information I want, on the understanding that when I've blown up the whole concern I don't say anything about your making 'Ann' into 'Amy.'"

"We might just as well act friendly, Mr. Snodgers; but if you won't, it isn't my fault. You must take your course, and I

mine. As to your story about the register, you know very well that neither you nor anybody else can prove what you say."

"Then good morning, Mr. Gribble," said Snodgers, resuming his hat. "I shan't trouble you any more." And the agent walked out of the office, leaving the lawyer in a state of mind which he had oftener caused than experienced.

CHAPTER XI.

LOVE VERSUS DUTY.

GRADUALLY the people around Hever Court ceased to marvel at Clara's elevation. She drove about among them, quite the lady paramount of the district, always commanding and obtaining submission and respect. She had induced her aunt to remove her family name from its prominent connection with the White Horse, and herself into a cottage where the stout hostess pined for the duties that were no longer hers. But, for all this, there were whispers in plenty that all

did not go well, up at the Court, and terrible stories were in circulation as to Will's cruelty and Clara's extravagance. They were, however, all false ; for Will was not cruel, in the sense these good villagers supposed, nor was Clara extravagant.

But her marriage had been followed by deep disappointment. She had never loved Will. Soon she made the discovery that his drunken habits were inveterate, and that all the opportunities belonging to wealth had improved him in nothing but outward appearance ; but it was not then she experienced this bitterness. Her nature was such that the sensual enjoyments which wealth affords soon became necessities of life accepted without pleasure. So that when Clara asked

herself, as she often did, in a passionate way, what she had gained by her marriage, she put out of consideration all those physical comforts, which in her maiden days would have seemed so very attractive.

Ambition and revenge. These had been her influencing motives, so she thought, and how had the first been rewarded? She saw and smarted under the reception they met with from persons of their own rank in the neighbourhood. They retained acquaintances, but there was no intimacy, nothing like friendship, between Hever Court and the best houses around. Many noticed Will as a good sportsman; but his hand, they said among themselves, was getting shaky, and his seat across country was not what it had been.

He was treated with no respect ; and when it was rumoured that the sale at Thistlewood was forced by Will, he was "cut" by a good many people. It had fared ill with Clara's ambition.

And her revenge seemed ungratified. To sit in the seat that would have been occupied by Edward's wife ; to rule where he had been dispossessed, had seemed to her a prospect promising unspeakable delight. But for such as Clara to enjoy revenge, the stroke must be seen to fall ; the writhings of the victim must be witnessed. As it was she felt that Edward's aversion for her would be changed to contempt by her marriage. Her nature, passionate and sensuous, abhorred any prolonged effort, and

now she would have given all her wealth and humbled all her pride for one loving look from this man whom she had so loved and so hated.

She had felt disgusted when she heard what had taken place at Thistlewood through the agency of Gribble working upon and with her husband. She had indeed some sense of lazy satisfaction at the thought of Lucy's fall in worldly position; but she feared it would only result in bringing Lucy and Edward nearer together, and this thought made her wretched.

So she lived—joyless, aimless, hopeless; without appetite for the smaller and more innocent delights which surrounded her, and without nerve and energy enough to sur-

round herself with the more toilsome, and perhaps less innocent enjoyments her wealth, and position, and beauty might have enabled her to command.

The most constant visitors at Hever Court were Major Brabazon and Mr. Rington. The Major was a well-preserved man of about five-and-forty, who found attendance upon Clara and quarters at Hever much more to his mind than his post of duty in Hertford. And Mr. Rington, who was "a noted sharp man" at horse-dealing and shooting-matches, found his reward in following Will, sharing his drinking bouts, and in buying and selling for him. There was no jealousy between these gentlemen : each kept to his own department. If the Major were trotting beside

Clara's pony-carriage, Mr. Rington would perhaps be equally well occupied in trying a horse for Will.

The Major affected gallantry ; and, as a matter of duty to himself, had made love to Clara in a quite improper manner. But she had rendered it at once wholly impossible for the Major, if he had wished, to renew the subject, by receiving his advances with laughter, and a thinly disguised contempt, which only just permitted Major Brabazon's not very nice sense of honour to accept her evident unwillingness to dismiss so useful an attendant.

The usual party of four were seated at luncheon, when Rington, who had known Hever in the days of Will's father, said,—

“Your brother Edward has come down to live at Moss Farm, Frankland.”

Will did not observe the eager look of attention, so uncommon with her now, which Clara turned on the speaker ; but the Major did.

“You don’t say so,” was Will’s reply.

“I do, though : I saw him walking about in the garden,—you know it is close to the road,—and deuced ill he looked.”

“He wishes I was deuced ill, I lay,” muttered Will ; while Clara’s face glowed with shame and suddenly revived emotion.

The Major hazarded the opinion that it was enough to make a man look “devilish ill” to lose such a property as Hever Court. Then he saw that his remark was not well

received by Clara, though she was listening to a conversation between her husband and Rington as to the value of the Moss Farm, and Edward's obstinacy in refusing to part with it.

She listened to their talk about "Simpkins' farm," and "the Thistlewood fields," and "Bingwell Common," until she was possessed of a very accurate notion where Edward's retreat lay.

She resolved to drive in that direction the same afternoon, not to call upon Edward, but from an irresistible impulse to see the place in which he had made his home.

Clara relieved herself of the attendance of the Major by giving him a commission to execute in Hertford, which she

pretended was of great importance and confidence.

Will had no idea himself of calling upon Edward, nor did he suppose that Clara would care to do so. He could understand her preference for Edward in the old days ; but now such a preference would have seemed to him absurd and impossible.

Clara whipped her ponies along towards the Moss Farm, which lay at no great distance from the Bingwell station. Her servant, accustomed to her leisurely drives, noticed the different progress of to-day ; and putting this and that and all that he had heard together in his mind, he set it down for certain that his mistress was on her way to Moss Farm to see " Mr. Edward," the news

of whose arrival had already reached the servants' hall.

She drove on, thinking of the days when she had loved him hopelessly, half wishing that they and her liberty to love him were hers again. "Yet to be again poor and dependent! No; better as it is." This was the conclusion of her soliloquy.

As she approached the house which she had been told was Moss Farm, Clara felt she must abandon her intention not to see Edward. She wavered miserably between seeing him and not seeing him. Which would be the greater trial? She hardly knew. In her heart she loved him, now that he was ill and ruined, more than ever. Her falsity to her marriage vows sat lightly on her con-

science, for she had made them but formally. She might—might she not ;—as the brother of her husband, love him ; but then not as she loved him—not as she loved him, hating her husband for the bar his relationship had raised between them, yet accepting and feeling the absolute necessity to herself of the riches he had conferred upon her.

But to see Edward would involve such abject debasement. She felt that he would know the whole story of Will's gross conduct towards Lucy at Dropton ; and he would scorn her for having offered him her love and then having sold herself to this man.

Wistfully she scanned the house, which was one of those small farm-houses having three windows on the first floor, and two,

with a door, beneath, standing some little distance from the road, with a garden lying between, well stocked with wallflowers and such well known old-fashioned plants.

Around the doorway and high among the upper windows, there flourished a rose, intertwined with a creeper; and at the side of the house stretched a long garden, where she supposed Rington had seen Edward walking.

He was not there now; but if he saw the ponies or herself, or heard that she had passed the house, would he not think it unkind, and perhaps undutiful in her not to have called? Yet it required an effort to drive up to the little gate with the intention of going into the house.

However, Clara did this. Her eyes were

fixed on the ground as she stepped from the carriage; and gracefully taking her ample skirts in her hand, she opened the gate and walked up the narrow pavement to the door, her heart fluttering with emotions she could not have described.

She saw that Edward had made an effort to rise from a couch to receive her. How ill he looked! This was her first thought. The same handsome features; the same truthful, open eyes, the hair she thought so beautiful in its unstudied waves; his face so thin, and with such a weary, yet feverish and anxious look. But she could not fail to see that there was a really glad expression of welcome as he held out his hand, leaning with the other on the back of a chair.

“So glad to see you, Clara. How’s Will? So kind of you to come and see me. I’ve been walking in the garden, and it tires me so.” He sank back on the couch, exhausted by the effort he had made.

He could only point to a chair; and she, blushing and confused, stammered words of sympathy.

“Is Will quite well!” Edward repeated.

“Yes, he is quite well. We only heard of your being here, this morning.”

“I came to get strong; and then I intend to go to work at law in earnest, and I hope with success. You like Hever Court, I’m sure? A dear old place, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she assented mechanically, telling

the sad tale of her matrimonial disappointment by a single word.

She had expected Edward would be reproachful, or indignant, or contemptuous; but in place of that, he spoke as if their relationship were a thing of course; and as though nothing unusual had ever occurred between them.

“Can you have everything you want at this little place?”

“Oh! yes; especially if you will come and see me sometimes; and tell Will I hope to see him. We can be good friends now, I think.” And he smiled at her meaning, as he thought, that there could be no jealousy now between them on her account.

But all this forgiveness and forgetfulness on Edward's part did not make her happier. She loved him now as she had hated him when he left Bingwell. Her happiness would have been to have nursed him ; to have tended his every wish with the most loving care. She had no inclination for the proper *rôle* of sister-in-law, nor any anxiety to bring the brothers together. She would have been happier if his manner towards her had been less frank and free ; if he had seemed more embarrassed with memories of the past, as she was. Then she would not have been haunted with the miserable thought that he despised her.

“ Have you had more trouble in London, tell me ? ” she asked.

"Well, I have been ill and have lost all my money, Clara ; but I had more joy in one minute than all the trouble."

The almost merry look in his eyes stung her with fear of what was to come.

"I am engaged," he continued, "to Lucy Denman. I am not going to inflict lovers' talk upon you ;" he could not but mark her want of sympathy with his joy ; "but I may talk to you about it, Clara, for we are brother and sister now ; and I tell you, that when that dearest girl put her hand in mine and promised me her love, I felt all my cares and troubles fall from me, and nothing but happiness and hope have encircled me ever since."

Clara bit her lip, looking downward upon

the narrow space of carpet that divided them, in conscious confusion. She could not utter the false words of congratulation that would have been seemly and proper. All the devils in her nature were at war within her now. That he should treat her with the brotherly kindness he had shown was an affront ; but that he should calmly tell her of his love for Lucy, and expect her to rejoice with him in his engagement, was too much.

“ You would scarcely believe in my good wishes, Mr. Frankland,” she said, hardly knowing what she said.

“ Why not, Clara ?” Edward looked astonishment at her reply. “ But you must call me Edward, now.”

“Then God forgive me, Edward, for I cannot forget the past.”

She met his shamed and sorrowing look with one which he never forgot and could not then fathom. No more words passed between them. He attended her to the door, unable to walk farther; and when it closed upon her, Clara's heart was raging with humiliation and jealousy.

CHAPTER XII.

AN AMBUSCADE.

EDWARD was a good deal dismayed and annoyed by Clara's unhappy reference to the past, and the more so because it barred any further intercourse between them. In the loneliness of his new home he had felt so glad at seeing her, and hopeful of her being the means of reconciling Will and himself; for though he never supposed there could be much love between his brother and himself, yet it would be better for many reasons that

at least they should be on speaking terms again.

But he could make no advances now.

Day by day, under the combined influence of pure air and the equally pure and loving letters that he read again and again, with ever-increasing delight, Edward gained strength, and felt that soon he should be able to walk over to the cottage where Lucy lived with her father and mother.

He was sitting at the open window, musing hopefully upon a happy future, when he heard some one close the gate, and saw Mr. Snodgers smiling and bowing before him with an air of the most ineffable good nature.

"Glad indeed, sir, to see you looking so

much better. Just ran down to see you—found your address at your lodgings—something to our mutual advantage, I hope.”

After his journey, of course Edward was obliged to open his door to Mr. Snodgers and offer him a seat; though he performed these civilities with a very bad grace.

“Well, thank you, I will take a crust of bread and cheese; and we may as well to business at once,” continued the financial agent; and he proceeded to lay before the unwilling eyes of Edward a voluminous statement of the accounts of the Iron Working Company (Limited), proving, as it appeared, entirely to his own satisfaction, that the sum of one thousand pounds only was required to produce a much more

favourable realisation of assets, "such as would certainly insure the return of a large portion, if not the whole, of your principal, sir," and he unfolded to Edward how that having heard of his retirement here to a property of his own, it had occurred to him—Mr. Snodgers—"that perhaps you might, sir, like to mortgage this property with a view to obtaining this great advantage in the winding-up of the company."

This proposal, delivered in Mr. Snodgers' smoothest accents, put Edward into a passion, and he hurled "impostor" and "rogue" and "knave" at the agent, who seemed not altogether surprised or greatly moved by the explosion. Perhaps he had had many such cases to deal with before.

“Look here,” exclaimed Edward, pointing through the window at the distant clumps of elms, which were the glory of Hever Court park, and at the front of the house just visible from where they stood, “it is not a year since I was master of that place and owner of all the land between here and there. Well, I lost that, or, I should say, I gave it up to my—brother. Of the little fortune left me in that wreck, you have robbed me of the greater part; but you cannot be satisfied while any remains. Get out of my house. You are no better than a common thief.”

Mr. Snodgers made a hurried movement of retreat; but in his haste fell over a chair and set up a cry for “Help,” thinking per-

haps in his fright that Edward had struck him. The bailiff and his wife ran into the room, but were only in time to see that Edward was very angry, and that Snodgers had already gained the garden gate.

The financial agent slackened his pace when he saw that he was not followed, and now he had reached an eminence from which he could get a fuller view of Hever Court.

"A young fool," he muttered, wiping his face and the lining of his hat with his pocket-handkerchief. "I wasn't sure I should be so lucky as to drop right on to the property. I can forgive his hasty tongue, for it told me all that I wanted to know."

Mr. Snodgers made his way back to the

station, and there took "the fly," directing the driver to take him to Hever Court.

The agent had much to think of during his drive. Still, from time to time he looked about him upon the splendid woods, rich meadows, and well-farmed lands, for which the estate was famous. "Fine property," he said ; " very fine estate."

When "the fly" reached the door of Hever Court, the driver told him "that he coo'nt take him back, as he'd another job in that neighbourhood as was waitin' a'ready," so Mr. Snodgers, thinking himself very fortunate when the servant replied that Mr. Frankland was at home, paid the driver and sent his card in, saying, "That Mr. Frankland wouldn't know his name, but that he

wished to see him upon most important private business connected with the estate."

He refused Will's request by the servant, "that he would send in his business," and the result was that he found himself in the library with the master of the house. In about ten minutes after he had been closeted with Will, Clara was summoned by her husband, and the conference continued.

Nearly three hours elapsed before Mr. Snodgers left Hever Court. He had taken luncheon with Will and Clara, she being particularly gracious to him; and when he rose to leave, she apologised very much for being unable to offer him a carriage, "as all their horses that were not out, were ill;" but she herself accompanied him to the door,

and, standing on the steps, pointed out with the kindest care a footway by which he might get to the station in about four miles. "Make first for that great tree," she said, "then through the woods for about a mile, and the rest of the way is very clear."

Mr. Snodgers lifted his hat, and Clara bowed and smiled as he walked off. Will had sat sullenly silent during luncheon, scarcely speaking a word.

Mr. Snodgers was a good walker, and had plenty of time before him. But his mind was too full of all that had passed during the last three hours to enable him to look about with much interest. The deer skipped out of his path, and once a hare startled him by leaving its "form" within a

yard of his footstep. Scenery, however, was not much in Mr. Snodgers' line. At last he reached the great tree, a wide-spreading oak, which Clara had pointed out to him, and then he saw a narrow pathway, leading through the dense wood. It scarcely appeared to him to be in the line of his march, and he thought it led so much in another direction that it could hardly be the nearest approach to the station ; but there appeared to be no other, and, he reflected, "Of course Mrs. Frankland knew the path, probably it was a winding one," so he plunged into the wood without any further consideration.

The green boughs of the tall underwood met over the path, shutting out completely, at some points, the bright blue sky. Rabbits

ran here and there, showing their white tails to him as they disappeared among the tall brake. The woodland path wound to right and to left, till the financial agent was quite puzzled with its windings, and but for his implicit faith in Clara's directions would have thought himself in a maze. At length the wood grew so dense and dark, so silent—except for the melancholy notes of the birds, its most noisy inhabitants—that Mr. Snodgers began to feel, in a manner curious and inexplicable to himself, oppressed by the stillness and unchanging gloom which surrounded him. The tapping of a woodpecker startled him, he grew hotter and more nervous, but walked on, hoping soon to reach the boundary of the wood.

Before him, apparently right in his path, stood the picturesque ruin of an immense tree. He could see great holes in its trunk, and clefts which Time had made. Yet a little life lingered, and still it could put forth green leaves on the few branches which survived of all its greatness. But Mr. Snodgers was not speculating upon the hoary grandeur of this old king of the wood; he might have been thinking of the many generations upon whom it had looked down, all dead and gone, or moralising on the destiny of all life upon the earth, seeing that this existence of perhaps a thousand years was at length yielding to the inexorable law. He looked forward to the old tree as a possible turning point; the path had begun

at a big tree, and he thought it might well end at this one ; at all events, if not out of the wood, yet Snodgers hoped when he had passed this he should see his way more clearly,—his way to the station, to London, back again to those dusky chambers of his in Norfolk Street, where he lived and schemed to make the competence which not all his cunning had seemed till now to bring within his reach.

He was congratulating himself upon the near fulfilment of his hopes, for he saw, as he approached the old tree, that just beyond it the path opened upon a broader one, when he heard somebody or something move quickly from behind the trunk of the old tree ; but before he knew who or what it

was, there followed a loud noise at the side of his face, with a flashing, stunning fire-stroke, and then he fell dead with a pistol-bullet through his brain.

The ferns among which his head had fallen were splashed with blood, and the warm stream still trickled from his death-wound, when a tall man stood over him, moving away the blood-stained ferns to look at his face. Every feature in Mr. Gribble's face, for he it was, expressed horror and terror. He looked about him as a man who expects, who knows, that some one must be at hand. He laid his hand on the dead man's heart, but felt no motion; then listened for a moment with his ear close to the chest, but there was no sound of

respiration. Then, leaving the body, he rushed out into the broad path; but had made only a few steps when he almost ran against Edward Frankland.

"You must come with me," said Gribble, springing upon him.

"What! why?" replied Edward, hardly at first recognising his assailant. Gribble's manner was wild and excited, and Edward's nerves were scarcely yet in a condition to enable him to meet such a shock.

"Mr. Snodgers has been murdered."

"I heard a shot fired," said Edward, horrified.

"You'll have to prove you didn't fire it," returned Gribble. Edward had shaken off his hold, and they stood confronting each other.

“I—I don’t know where he is. I have not seen him since he left my house at twelve o’clock.”

The lodge at the park-gates was the nearest house at hand. Gribble said he was running away to get help ; but now he went back with Edward to the spot where the murdered man lay, and together they dragged and carried him to the lodge. Then the village doctor was sent for, and he pronounced Mr. Snodgers to be quite dead.

In reply to the doctor’s inquiry of Edward if he had any suspicion of the murderer, he said, “No, not the least ;” and then told how he had met Gribble. But the lawyer—they were all three standing round the body—interrupted him, advising him signifi-

cantly to say nothing to criminate himself, for that suspicion pointed to him as the criminal.

Edward looked aghast at this repetition of the charge; and could say nothing but a mere protest of his innocence. He had no right to make a counter-charge against Gribble. He was so confused by the circumstances.

“What were you doing in the wood?” he asked of Gribble.

“I had an appointment this afternoon with Mr. Frankland; and I was walking from the station to Hever Court, when I heard the shot fired, and hastening to the place, discovered the body lying in the path.”

“The people at the station,” Gribble continued, “will remember that I arrived by the train at 2.25 ; and Mr. Frankland will tell you or anybody else that I had an appointment with him this afternoon. Besides, I have his letter making the appointment.”

He then talked apart with the Bingwell constable, who had hustled up to the lodge full of importance, his hands itching for somebody's collar. Gribble told this man that Edward had lost a great deal of money through Snodgers ; that Edward admitted the fact of Snodgers' having been with him this day at his house ; and as it appeared to him quite clear that no one else in the parish could have ill-will towards the murdered man, he asked the constable to

take him to the nearest magistrate—not Mr. Frankland, for obvious reasons—and upon his information get a warrant for Edward's arrest.

“Unless,” said Gribble, in a confidential tone, “you feel that suspicion is strong enough to take him at once; and perhaps that would be the best course.”

It was quite the course which was most pleasing to the fussy constable.

He at once arrested Edward on a charge of “wilful murder of this 'ere gent,” pointing to the body, for he was ignorant of Snodgers' Christian name.

And Edward, reflecting on all that had passed, seeing that there existed abundant ground of suspicion against himself, replied

haughtily, as if disdaining to discuss the question of his innocence with this village blockhead,—

“Very well. I shall not resist your authority. I hope you may discover your error before long.”

In the constable's cart, Gribble and Edward were driven first to Moss Farm, as Edward wished to get some things. There Gribble adroitly learned from the bailiff's wife, that Edward and Snodgers had quarrelled that morning ; and “she thought that the young master was goin' to hit him.”

And when midnight came Edward found himself in a cell of Hertford jail.

CHAPTER XIII.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

THE news of the murder was quickly carried from the lodge to the house, and Will came down to look at the body. At the inquiry before the magistrate, the next day, Will added to the stock of facts already known concerning the murder, by deposing that the murdered man had been for three hours at his house, and that, indeed, he had only left Hever Court twenty minutes before the time at which Gribble stated he had discovered the body.

Upon being asked whether he had any previous acquaintance with Mr. Snodgers, Will replied "No;" and being further requested to state the nature of the business that led the deceased to his house, Will said, after some hesitation, that Snodgers had called to talk to him about Edward's affairs, and that he supposed the deceased hoped to get some money out of him on Edward's account, probably with a view of putting it in his own pocket.

Finally, the magistrates—expressing the great grief under the pressure of which they were about to perform a most painful duty—a duty rendered doubly distressing by the fact that the prisoner was one of their own

body—committed Edward for trial at the ensuing assizes.

Never till that moment had the full horror and danger of his position come upon him. The change had seemed so unreal, so impossible, that even the night before, in his cell, he had been quite unable to realise his situation. The whole affair appeared like a dream ; but this was the awakening—there was no fiction here. Of the Bench, he had known the majority all his life, and they had been the friends of his father and of himself.

He had mechanically assented to the suggestion of a solicitor, that he should appear for him. But when he had heard this gentleman asking the Bench to admit him

to bail, he was inclined to dissent, because he knew no one of whom he should like to ask the favour, nor did he wish to be at large again till this horrible charge was disposed of. However, the Bench refused the application, and he was remitted to jail.

It was some comfort to think that the assizes would be held within the month ; but to reflect upon the probable issue of the trial was very melancholy. Neither Edward nor his solicitor could find any loophole of escape from the web of circumstances in which he was enveloped. No will, no trace of his relationship or family, was found among Mr. Snodgers' papers ; the solicitor whom Edward had retained—a really clever and able man—could hear of no one who

was in any way connected with Snodgers, except in business. There was abundant evidence of his hard dealings with many ; there were many, it might well be thought, who had good cause for ill-feeling against him, but there appeared nothing to indicate any one as having a direct interest in his death, or any motive, other than that which it was assumed had inspired Edward with a wish to kill him. They looked carefully into Gribble's relations with Snodgers ; but there was not one suspicious circumstance against the attorney, other than that of being the discoverer of the dead body.

Edward often and often wondered if Lucy had heard of the charge against him, and this was the sorest of his troubles. He had

felt so happy in the possession of her love, and soon they would have been meeting frequently. With returning health, he had become hopeful, and happy. Now this bright prospect was all dashed to the ground, and he, and, it might be, his memory, stained with the assumed guilt of a foul crime.

But two days after his committal, he received the following note :—

“DEAREST,—You will know how shocked and grieved I am, at the wicked charge which has been made against you. What great troubles you have had to bear ! I am in misery to think that I can do nothing to discover the criminal, but pray for, and hope

for, and love you always. Believe in the goodness of God to protect the innocent, and in my constant love.

“Always yours,

“LUCY DENMAN.”

“Dear Lucy, so gentle and true !” he said, as he kissed the letter.

The month wore away, the judges arrived, and the assizes commenced. Mr. Justice Blundell, who presided in the Crown Court, referred to the case, in his charge to the grand jury, as a most extraordinary one, resting entirely upon circumstantial evidence. He twiddled and twirled his eye-glass, while he did so, evidently sensible of the great responsibility of speaking of a case

in which the verdict might rest so much upon his words.

The grand jury could not do otherwise than find a true bill against Edward Frankland, and the case, as it was supposed it would occupy some hours, was appointed to be tried at the commencement of the business next morning.

The court was crowded. Edward stepped forward to the front of the dock with a grave and reverent air, scanning the face of the judge attentively, and then glancing towards the jury as though to see the quality of the men by whom his fate was so soon to be decided.

The tone in which he replied "Not Guilty" to the question of the Clerk of

Arraigns made a favourable impression on the listeners. Then the Court settled to silence, as the Leader of the Circuit rose to speak to the indictment. He commenced by referring to the calamities which had been caused by the "unwarrantable expansion of the limited liability system of association," and he "feared there was too much reason to believe that this foul murder was in some degree traceable to these evils." Edward listened with shame to an elaborate detail of the formation and existence of the Iron Working Company. "The deceased," continued Mr. Coif, Q.C., "was one of that odious class of promoters, a sort of financial bird of prey," he explained to the Hertfordshire jurymen ; and then he read Edward's

letters to Mr. Snodgers, making him appear, so the prisoner felt ashamed to think, as though he were himself almost "one of that odious class." "It appears, gentlemen of the jury," Mr. Coif went on to say, "that this company is in process of being wound up, which seems to be the usual fate of these undertakings, and that the prisoner at the bar has the prospect of losing the whole, or at least the greater part of his investment. Then the case opens in this county, and we find the deceased at the prisoner's house."

Mr. Gribble was the first witness called. In cross-examination, Edward's counsel asked him if he did not meet the prisoner as he was himself coming from the body.

Mr. Gribble admitted that he did, about

thirty yards from where the body lay ; and, in reply to another question, he also stated that the prisoner "did not appear to be hastening from the scene."

The constable had found no arms or ammunition upon Edward ; there were guns and pistols at Moss Farm, but they could not have been used by him to shoot the deceased.

The bailiff and his wife from Moss Farm gave very unwilling testimony to the quarrel which had taken place between Edward and Snodgers. Their well-intentioned reticence had a most damaging effect upon the prisoner's case. The man and woman both admitted that Edward had left the house half-an-hour, at least, before the time at

which it was assumed the murder was committed. They supposed he was going for a walk—"he often did, in the woods."

The fly-driver deposed to having driven the deceased to Hever Court.

Then Will stepped into the witness-box. He looked pale and bloated, and appeared confused and ashamed. But his confusion was generally attributed to his relationship to the prisoner. He stated that Snodgers had called at Hever Court ; that neither he nor his wife had ever seen him before ; that for more than two hours the deceased was endeavouring to induce him, by referring to the circumstances under which he obtained the estate, to make the prisoner some allowance, or give him some share of the property,

and that regarding Snodgers as having come directly from the prisoner, his half-brother, he had entertained him at luncheon, and intended to consider the proposals he had made, as he considered, on Edward's behalf.

Such was the case that Mr. Coif offered to the jury. "If they could reconcile these facts with the innocence of the prisoner, no one would be more gratified than himself with such a result ; if they could not, it was their plain duty, from which he was sure they would not shrink, to find a verdict of wilful murder against the prisoner at the bar."

Edward's counsel submitted with great confidence that there was not one tittle of evidence directly incriminating the prisoner.

The reason he had to dislike the deceased was very plain, but no motive had been suggested as leading him to wish for the death of Mr. Snodgers. He was approaching the body when Mr. Gribble encountered him. He had no fire-arms about him, and his brace of pistols were at his house—unused.

Justice Blundell summed up with great care and caution. Commenting on the facts, he said, "It was the presumption of the prosecution that the prisoner at the bar, influenced by the wrongs that Snodgers had done his financial interests, and possibly moved to anger by further demands, had slain the deceased. It was for them to say whether in their judgment he had committed this crime or not."

The jury deliberated for three hours, and it was night when they returned into court to give their verdict. They found the prisoner Guilty, with a recommendation to mercy on account of the provocation he had received from the deceased in connection with a limited liability company.

Edward started when he heard his own name spoken by the judge, and life seemed to be already suspended as he heard the awful sentence of death passing from his lips. As for the recommendation to mercy, the judge promised to forward it to the proper quarter, but he could give the prisoner no hope that it would be favourably regarded.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLARA MAKES A SUDDEN JOURNEY.

"GUILTY, do you say, Will?—sentenced to be hung? Oh! my God! my God! what shall I do?" And Clara, whom her husband had never before seen so moved, wrung her hands and moaned as if the sentence had been passed upon herself.

"Upon herself!" she thought. Heavier by far was it that it should fall on him whom but yesterday she hated, whom she now loved with an intensity that found no parallel in her own selfishness.

"What do you mean?" asked Will, roughly; "of course it's an ugly thing, a damned ugly thing, to have your father's son hung for murder, but, 'pon my word, I believe he did it."

"*You* believe!" Clara's lip was curled with the utmost scorn. "Did you stand to your story as to what Mr. Snodgers came here about?"

"Yes, I did," was the sullen answer.

"Ah, well! perhaps it was for the best," she said, mournfully, yet addressing the words rather to herself than to her husband. "It could have done no good to—to do anything else."

"I believe you'd rather it was me than him, now," said Will, scowling at his wife.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" she replied, with a mocking sneer; "yes, I would—I would; I'd give my soul that you should change places with him, for," she added, as if determined to provoke her husband to the uttermost, "I love him!"

The mutter of his angry words followed in her ears as she hurried out of the room. In twenty minutes after she left Will, she was in her brougham, driving on fast towards Hertford.

When Clara came in sight of the sombre, frowning walls of the jail, she hid her pale face in her hands as if to shut out the sight of the place in which she knew Edward was confined. The brougham rattled on through the town and drew up at the railway station.

The afternoon express would be up in ten minutes.

"If your master asks for me," Clara said, dismissing her coachman, "tell him that I am unexpectedly called to London on business of life and death; I may be away two days—not more."

She swept across the platform, a conspicuous figure, though her dress was black. Passing a railway policeman who touched his hat to her, she shrunk from him almost with a start as though he had been going to assault her, and made a step backwards, then seeming to collect herself retired to the ladies' waiting-room.

No one could have supposed the tempest that raged beneath her pale, regular features

as she took her place in the train. Since she had been wealthy she had liberally indulged an elegant love of dress, delighting in all that was rich and costly. The fur trimming of her black velvet mantle was of the most rare and exquisitely fine sable. Her bonnet, a small thing of black lace and beads, did all that a head-dress could to increase her charms, and the long train which followed all her movements falling in unused folds, all the belongings of a rich, graceful, and beautiful woman, called the attention which it seemed her wish to avoid.

There were two gentlemen in the carriage in which she sat, young barristers who had probably been attracted to the same compartment by Clara's entry. She had hoped

to be alone, but she wore a thick veil and was very glad to feel that she had no knowledge of her fellow passengers nor they of herself.

"I'd no idea we should get a verdict, Bates," said one.

Clara listened with almost convulsive attention: she was sure they were talking of *the* trial.

"Hadn't you? Stanley offered to back the rope for a fiver; but I wouldn't take less than three to one, the evidence was so dead against the feller."

"So it was; but I know old Coif had his doubts about it. He said the prisoner's case wasn't at all well worked. The circumstances were strong, but why didn't the defence find

out more about Snodgers, and if old Coif had cross-examined William Frankland, he would have been more shaky than he was. D'ye know, Bates, *I* think that fellow is not altogether sorry that his half-brother should swing. Depend upon it he has family reasons for not loving him."

Then their conversation came closer still to Clara, for they talked—and though they spoke very low, yet her strained and interested attention lost no word of the conversation—of "some woman sure to be at the bottom of it"—"Mrs. William was a devilish handsome woman"—"perhaps Edward had wanted her"—"perhaps William hated his brother because Mrs. William loved him"—"she was a bar-maid, wasn't she?" and much

more, all painful in the most exquisite sense to the tortured listener. These were only some of the scraps of the talk which fell on her ears.

At length the train reached the ticket platform, and for a moment there was silence in the carriage. Acting on a sudden impulse, Clara lifted her veil and addressed the young barrister, who she had learned from his conversation had been engaged for the prosecution.

Well enough she knew the power of her beauty, in no degree lessened by the sad expression her face now wore.

"You, sir, who have *not* talked lightly of this dreadful trial," Clara glanced a quick reproach at Bates as she emphasised the

negative, "will perhaps tell me, as the prisoner's best friend, what would be the character of the evidence required to save him from—" Clara shuddered, and looked anxiously at the young man for a reply.

"Oh!—evidence—very sorry," the barrister was going to apologise for the freedom with which they had talked of the case, and felt embarrassed; but Clara checked his apologies with an imperious gesture, and repeated her question.

"What character of evidence?"

"A stronger probability, or, looking to the sentence having been passed, I ought to say the certainty of the guilt of some other person—evidence fixing the murder incontestibly upon some other person."

"Thank you," said Clara, calmly, and leant back in her seat.

The young man noticed that she was very pale, and that her mouth twitched as he gave his answer. He made, too, a mental note that she was very handsome, and of determined character, as he saw how she straightened the quivering muscles around her lips.

"And what if such evidence were forthcoming ; what should be done with it?"

She put this question abruptly, as if with some effort.

"Sent to the Home Secretary at once, that is, the depositions which would be made before a magistrate. I fear there is no prospect of such being found," he added

kindly, fancying that Clara was on a hopeless errand. "Can I—may I be of any service to you?"

"No, thanks; but I should like to know your name. Will you favour me?"

"Oh, certainly! there it is. Can you read it? Mr. William Woodhouse, 8, King's Bench Walk, Temple. Have you a carriage here?" They were at King's Cross Station.

"I am going to wait some time at the station," replied Clara. "Good evening." She bowed a sad smile as Mr. Woodhouse raised his hat.

Clara watched the young men rattle away together in a Hansom cab; then she permitted an obsequious porter to call a square cab for herself, and asked the driver if he

knew "Pennyfields, Poplar." Had not everything about her appeared unreal, she would have felt some surprise at his "yes," for she had not been prepared to find so easily the placeshe wished to reach. The man held the door, and mechanically she stepped into the cab, not caring to ask whether it was for a drive of ten minutes or of hours.

How dazzling and strange the lights appeared! Rattle, rattle, with a continued jarring noise that went to no tune at all, the cab rolled through the busy streets. More than once she wondered where she was going—whether it was all a dream—whether she had any defininte purpose before her. But when the cabman took his way by some narrow, dark streets near the Tower, where

once or twice some preceding cart brought Clara to a standstill, then her face set with a firm purpose and a fixed resolve, and she felt impatient of the obstacle to her progress. Then again in the dreary length of the Commercial Road, the monotony of progress brought back the feeling of unreality, out of which she was only awoken by the cabman's hoarse voice,—

“What number was it you was a wanting?
This here's Pennyfields.”

“Twenty-two,” returned Clara, promptly,
and her pulse quickened.

“Is it a korfy shop?”

“I don't know.”

“Yer see,” the cabman said, “the numbers
ain't plain : there's twenty-one, that's Tom

Trotter's, the sporting 'ouse, I know ; then here's a pork butcher's, name o' Stubbs, on one side of it, and the korfy shop—why there it's rote up, 'Frankland's Korfy 'Ouse'—the t'other."

Clara started as she heard the familiar name, evidently not expecting to meet with it. "Oh! that's it," she said, and alighted, bidding the driver to wait.

It was a mean little place. There was a nearly bare ham-bone in one window, and a gory piece of roast beef, a few eggs, and two or three coffee cups and saucers in the other. Of the double doors in the centre, one was held slightly open by a leathern strap, and yielded easily to Clara's touch.

She was half-stifled by the choking smell

that greeted her. Two of the dirty little tables were surrounded by the lowest class of dock-labourers, smoking and drinking coffee. Those who were looking towards her ceased talking, and held their pipes from their lips astonished, as well they might be, at the wondrous entry of such a well-dressed lady.

"Where is the woman who keeps this place?" asked Clara of one of the men.

"'Ere, mis-ses, wan-ted!" he shouted, by way of reply, following his speech by loud kicks on the wainscot. "Yer see, mum, she's 'ard of 'earing," he added civilly, by way of explanation to Clara.

"The lady warnts you," he continued, referring an old woman who now appeared to Clara; "summut better an korfy as she

come hafter, I should say." The last remark was addressed in a low tone, and generally to his comrades.

A keener observer might have seen that Clara regarded the old woman on her first appearance with a quivering terror rarely inspired by such a feeble object. The woman, who had never been tall, was bent with illness, her face pale and sickly; on one of her sunken cheeks four brown moles formed a disagreeable but very certain means of recognition. It seemed that the sight of these, and the consequent certainty that the object of her journey was obtained had most affected Clara. There was not the slightest sign of recognition in the face of the woman. Conscious of her infirmity, she was sidling

up to Clara, and yet very fearfully, knowing that her greasy dress was no mate for the lady's rich silk and velvet.

All Clara's imperious manner seemed to have dropped on the appearance of this woman. Into the woman's ear, in a tone pleading and dejected she spoke, "Your room, private," pointing to the door at the end of the shop, by which the coffee-house keeper had entered; and as this door swung behind them, she found herself in a little, hot, stuffy kitchen, strewn with the dirty utensils of the business, and odorous of many disgusting smells, in which those of rusty bacon, rancid butter, and chicory, seemed to predominate. It was quite impossible for her in this little cabin to avoid contact with

much that was nasty, but the fright of the woman, whom I will call Mrs. Frankland, for that was her name, at seeing a lady so dressed, sit down upon her backless chair, was too great for utterance.

“We’re in a terrible muddle,” she said; “you’ll be greased up to the eyes, ma’am. Mind that gridgiron, ’tis right against your dress.” Then she felt frightened, seeing that Clara took no heed. There must, she thought, be some terrible cause for the visit of this pale, handsome lady, who did nothing but look at her in such a curious way, as if she had desperate need of something, and was fearful of asking for it. That this was the expression of Clara’s face, Mrs. Frankland could plainly see. Deafness and pain, with

the sole care of her house and business had sharpened this woman's power of reading eyes.

She removed the gridiron, and made Clara's seat altogether less dangerous; then gathered up her dress in front and pinned it on her breast, so that she might approach her guest, but Clara had not yet spoken to her except by faint smiles and monosyllabic acknowledgments of her kind attention.

Delicately, as though she were fearful of intruding within the precinct of Clara's costly bonnet, Mrs. Frankland approached her head, and whispered, "You ain't going to be ill, are you? There's a nice bed up-stairs. I know it's aired, because I slep' in it myself t'other night."

There was an anxious, motherly tenderness in her tone, which seemed to be responded to on Clara's part by an irrepressible thrill of shivering. She turned her eyes till they met Mrs. Frankland's, and then hastily, with a little start, withdrew them towards the ground.

"No ! I'm not ill—at least, not what you mean," she replied sadly, and so coldly as to increase the woman's wonder regarding the cause of her visit. "Sit down there," Clara continued, in the same hard, mechanical voice, pointing to the only other chair in the room, "I want to speak to you."

CHAPTER XV.

CLARA IN UNFASHIONABLE QUARTERS.

MRS. FRANKLAND, the coffee-house keeper, sat herself down at Clara's bidding, drawing her chair—though its rickety condition made this a difficult and dangerous operation—as close as was possible, and then supporting her head on her knees, craned her neck forwards to catch the words of her strange visitor.

“I knew your husband—saw him lately,” was the first thing that Clara said.

She must have known something of the

effect her words would produce, or surely she could never have maintained unmoved an expression so colourless and cold when the woman sprang from her chair, and, regardless of all contact with Clara's finery, laid her clenched hands and bare arms in her lap.

"What! my John? Oh, ma'am, you're an angel come from heaven! and yet, ma'am"—she looked wistfully in Clara's face—"I hope he ain't there yet."

"Don't touch *me*," Clara said, lifting the poor woman's hands. "What! did you love him?"

"Love him? Of course I did. Who else had I to love? But, ma'am, where is he? You've come to tell me he's dead."

"Yes," replied Clara, shuddering so that the woman felt her shake ; " he is—dead."

" My John ! my John !"

The widow's cry was pitiful to hear.

In unmoved silence that was full of sadness, Clara saw the hot tears of a deep and heartfelt grief course over the poor widow's grimy cheeks, the furrows they made wiped and wiped away with a still more grimy towel.

" Seven years," she sobbed, " ago—he left me—we had—a set-to about a five-pound note that—was lost. He said—I'd stole it—he went away—I've never heard of him from that day to this."

" He left you—deserted you—left you to get your living by yourself, or starve ;—didn't

you hate him?" demanded Clara, with an earnest fury in her tone.

The widow lifted her face out of the towel, looked wonderingly and with a most piteous grief at Clara—"You don't know what it is to be a lone woman."

This was all she said, and for a minute nothing was audible but the spasmodic sobs she struggled to repress, and the talk of the dock-men in the shop.

"But tell me, ma'am—for God A'mighty's sake, tell me—where have they put him? How did he die? Am I too late to see him? You haven't buried him without letting *me* look at the corpse? Why! what was he to you?"

She spoke this question sharply, almost

recovering from her grief at the sight of Clara's face during her questions. A horror so dreadful overcame her proud features that the woman was startled into momentary forgetfulness of her own trouble at the aspect of such an awful struggle as was evident in Clara's face. But she mastered it quickly, though her voice trembled as she replied—

“I did not come here to tell you how he died; you shall see him. But there is a man I want to find, with you—you shall see the body together—a man named John Snow.” Clara took a piece of paper from her purse and read from it, “‘John Snow, Fulwood's Rents, Holborn.’ Do you know him?”

“Where—when are we to go?” Mrs. Frankland was breathless with excitement.

“Oh! you know him, then, do you?”

“Yes, surely; he’s called ‘Peep-show Johnny’ now; he was a greengrocer. Just as if it was yesterday,” she sobbed again, “I remember John Snow in a red waistcoat and velvet coat; he was at our wedding, and signed as one of the witnesses.”

“You remember the church?” asked Clara.

“Don’t I—Saint Mary’s, Paddington; that was the church: there it is all wrote down, and my lines are up-stairs. No; my little bag’s down here, so it is.”

Out of a bag covered with coarse worsted work, that had once been bright in colour, she took a piece of newspaper, and beneath

three covers was her marriage certificate. The marriage was between John Frankland and Ann Campbell.

"'Tain't no use now," she said, mournfully, as Clara returned it, after carefully looking over the date and names.

"And your name was Ann Campbell—your maiden name?" asked Clara.

Mrs. Frankland, the coffee-house keeper, replied in the affirmative.

"Will you come with me and find this man—this John Snow?" inquired Clara.

"Will he be at home?"

Mrs. Frankland said "he hadn't any regular home, but he always had lodged somewhere in 'the Rents,'" and "likely enough he'd be a-bed by this time." At all events,

“ten or eleven o'clock at night was a good hour to find him.” As for herself, “she could go when her gal came in ;” and presently, on the appearance of a slatternly maid-of-all-work, Mrs. Frankland put on her bonnet and shawl and went with Clara to the door where the cab was waiting.

She had not spirit enough to press Clara for more information about her husband and the circumstances of his death. She was one of those sickly, underfed, in every respect poor women, not unfrequently to be met with in London, now morbidly excited with the mysterious horror Clara's visit and news had given her, filled at present with a certain sense of importance as she felt a dim consciousness of being the most interested

person in the end of their expedition, which she supposed was the identification of her husband's body.

Clara maintained impassive silence during their ride except for one moment, when, in answer to a question, she said, "He died—he was killed near my house—you and Snow will go down in a day or two and see him." Then came an eager question, "How did he die? how was he killed?" but Clara would say no more, and sat back, her face covered with her veil.

Mrs. Frankland conducted her through the narrow entrance to Fulwood's Rents. It was only a little after ten o'clock, and there were a good many people—dwellers in the Rents—sitting on the doorsteps and lolling

about. But in the centre, or near it, was a group of children gathered round a peep-show. Mrs. Frankland noticed this, and at once drew Clara towards the exhibition. "That's Snow," she said, pointing to the exhibitor, a little old man, only a head and shoulders above the tiny children whose half-pence he was trying to draw from their not unwilling hands. A little old man dressed in a long overcoat, a battered hat surrounded by a crape band yellowing with age, who had a stubbly beard, that if it had been clean would have been white. As he described the scenes to the two children who stood each with an eye close to the peephole, his almost toothless mouth opened and shut like that of a fish, without any effect upon the

upper features. His little nose, his watery eyes, not even his eye-brows moved with the narration. Nothing could be more comically mechanical than his mode of speaking to the scenes. When he had finished the description of one he moved to pull the string which changed the scene.

"Yor-rk Carstle in the distance," he was saying as they approached. "Tur-rpin a ridin' his famus mare, Black Bess. 'My bonny mare you sha-nt farll inter the 'ands of the perlice', so 'e outs with 'is pistol an' shoots 'er."

"The lar-st scene of hall, Tybun—ullo Mrs. Frankland, wot's you a doin' 'ere? blay-guard sort of a night ain't it? You want me do you—and the lady there?" he jerked his

tall hat towards Clara, "Well I won't be long. Tur-rpin in the ca-art. They're a readin' the berryin' sarvice over 'im; the gallus in the distance. You wouldn't like to 'ave a look, ma'rm, afore I put the lites out?" he said to Clara, "'tis wery pooty an' takes wonnerful this larst scene. Well, yer needn't."

Johnny was offended by Clara's turning away without speaking to him.

"I thort you might ha' been bringin' 'er to 'ave a peep." He spoke to Mrs. Frankland. "Well, if it ain't that, wot's her little game?"

"Tell him what we want," said Clara.

"Know 'im," he said, when Mrs. Frankland had told him, in her own tearful way,

the purpose of their visit. "Know 'im? I rayther think I should; he ain't growed out o' my nollodge."

"When did you see him last?" Clara asked.

"I carn't rightly say," returned the showman; "'taint werry long ago, yer know, since he got into trubble, and when he cum out, I fancy I see 'im one day in Obun, but I was a-takin' 'apence at the time, up a coort, yer see, mum—konsequently I didn't see much on 'im as he was a parsin'."

Clara asked him if he was always to be found here; and when he replied, "Allus sure for two nights out o' the seven," she carefully took note of the house in which he lodged and the floor on which his room was

situate. Then turning to Mrs. Frankland, she said, "I had thought of taking you with me to-morrow morning, but it will be impossible. I promise you shall hear from me to-morrow or the next day. If you go out, either of you, be sure to leave word where you may be found. Here is a sovereign each for you. You shall have more." And in spite of the prayers and entreaties of Mrs. Frankland to be taken to her husband, Clara left them, though the woman struggled to get into the cab. She was only successfully repulsed by Clara whispering to her, "If you do not go home now, you shall never see your husband's body."

The cabman asked where he should drive to, and Clara, after thinking a moment, as

though she had no further purpose, said,
“Oh ! near to Waterloo Bridge.”

She alighted in Wellington Street, and walked on to the bridge. The night was dark and cloudy, but there was no rain. She walked slowly towards the middle of the bridge, and then looked over the parapet into the dark water rolling slowly and heavily beneath with the receding tide.

She lifted her feverish head to the night wind, and then gazed down into the water.

“If my work were done,” she muttered to herself, “I couldn’t do it.” She shivered with the cold. “There are a hundred ways better than this. I shouldn’t mind the water, but the jump and the splash would

be so horrid. Well, I only came to look at it."

She turned away and walked quickly towards the Strand. There were yet five hours before she could return home by railway, but Clara was in no mood for going to bed. In half-an-hour she had taken a Hansom cab with a fresh horse, and was driving through the quiet streets in the direction of Hever Court.

CHAPTER XVI.

GUILTY, AND NOT GUILTY.

EARLY in the next morning Clara was again before the jail at Hertford.

As the wife of one of the visiting justices and Edward's sister-in-law, she was at once admitted to see him, but only in presence of two of the warders of the prison.

“Edward!”

He looked up from the dreadful place where he sate, as if frightened by the wonderful pathos of her voice. It expressed at

once to his ear, shame, and love, and sympathy.

“Edward, what shall I do?”

“You can do nothing. It is very kind of you to come to this place. But tell me, Clara, all that passed when Mr. Snodgers”—Edward spoke the name without the least hesitation—“was at Hever Court. Will said that he was asking for money on my account, but that could not be.”

“Oh! I can explain nothing,” she said, and then buried her face in her hands, sobbing as though her heart would break.

She was standing before him, when on a sudden she knelt on the stone floor, and laying both her hands on one of his, looked up in his face.

“Edward!” she said again, “if I tell you that I can and will save you, will you believe me, and put off at once from your mind all the horror of this place?”

“I can only be saved by the conviction of the real murderer.”

“The murderer will be found to-day, and by me.” She whispered this so low in his ear that the warders could not catch the words.

“Clara, you cannot mean what you say. Your kindness has made your——” He was going on to imply that her thoughts were wandering, but didn’t know how to put it.

“I can do this, and will do it, Edward,” she said, gazing tenderly in his face; “and

if I do this, will you forgive me for all the wrong I have ever done you?—and will you think—remember, that I loved you?” Her face fell on her hands, and he felt her tears through them upon his own hand.

In another moment she had risen, and was at the door of the cell. To his wondering, eager cry, “Clara!” she made no answer, but a longing, lingering look of love, as the door closed between them.

Then she was driven homewards, and on arriving at Hever Court went at once to her room. There, the first thing she did was to write a brief note to Sir Thomas Bufton, one of the most highly-respected of the county magistrates. He had never set foot in the house since Will’s accession. With this note

she dispatched a servant, giving him directions to make haste.

Seated again at her desk, she appeared to be about to undertake a longer task, judging from the paper this time in use.

Then she wrote at the head of the sheet in a large, bold hand—"The Confession of Clara Frankland!"

After resting her head on her hands, looking at this strange title, while she seemed to be recalling dates and circumstances, she continued to write.

The statement commenced with the arrival of Mr. Snodgers at Hever Court. "After he had been about ten minutes in the house, I was sent for by my husband." It then appeared that Mr. Snodgers told them he

had come down to see Edward about money matters ; that he had experienced a great deal of trouble with Edward's affairs ; that Edward had treated him shamefully that afternoon ; that if Edward had not done so, he had fully intended to lay before him the circumstances which he was now prepared to divulge to them.

“He then stated,” Clara wrote, “that the certificate of marriage, which we had believed to be that of my husband's father and mother, was the certificate of his own marriage ; that his real name was John Frankland ; that he was married at the church, and at the date mentioned in the certificate, to Ann Campbell ; that, owing to circumstances into which, he said, it was

unnecessary for him to go, he left his wife and changed his name to Joseph Snodgers, by which name he said every one knew him: he didn't suppose that anybody who knew him as Snodgers, knew him as Frankland also.

"He asserted positively," she continued, "that Mr. Gribble had altered 'Ann' into 'Amy' in the certificate; and when my husband told him that he had given Mr. Gribble a thousand pounds upon obtaining possession of the estate, he said, significantly, 'he thought as much.' He was out of England for a year at the time of our coming into the property, or he thought he should have seen the advertisements respecting the certificate."

Clara then wrote a full account of her visit to the wife of the murdered man, and her discovery of John Snow, the witness of their marriage, stating that she had received sufficient information from Mr. Snodgers to enable her to find these persons. She advised that the body should be exhumed and identified by them. Returning to what passed during Snodgers's visit to Hever Court, she continued to write—

“Then he began to make terms for silence. I had listened most attentively to all that he said, and all in a moment it came into my mind that I must shoot him by the old oak in the wood. I cannot altogether understand, nor can I attempt to explain, my motives in making this resolve.

Nothing, at the same time, could be more exasperating than his manner of bargaining, and I foresaw that we should be continually exposed to fresh and increasing demands. I made my husband promise him the five hundred a year that he asked; and was very civil to him, though I think he ascribed this to fear.

“At the front door I pointed out to him the path through the woods, entering by the King’s Oak, knowing that I could reach the old oak in half the time it would take him to get there. I have always kept loaded pistols in my room since my husband’s frequent absences at night made me nervous. With two in my pockets, I left the house unobserved; and passing through the shrub-

bery reached the hollow tree about three minutes before Mr. Snodgers arrived there. I shot him dead ; and returning, threw the pistol into the Spinney Pond. I got back to the house unperceived. I had slammed my door before leaving, and now I opened it very softly, so that, as I found afterwards, every one in the house was assured that I had been in my room during the time the murder was committed.

“ My husband is quite ignorant and innocent of any partnership in this crime ; I, alone, am guilty.”

When Clara reached this point she laid her pen down and read what she had written. Her face was hard and very pale. “ When I have signed that,” she

murmured, "my work is done. And then, what?"

She opened a secret drawer in her table, took from it a pistol, the fellow of that with which she had shot Snodgers, and looked carefully at the loading and the cap.

Her maid knocked at the door, and Clara hid the pistol in the pocket of her dress. The maid had come to announce the arrival of Sir Thomas Bufton.

She gave orders for him to be conducted to her room ; but while she waited, listening for his approach, she heard Will and Sir Thomas in loud altercation.

She could hear Sir Thomas say, "There is Mrs. Frankland's note;" and then, after a pause, during which she knew that Will

must be reading her note to Sir Thomas, he replied, "She's mad, by God she is; I thought she was!" and both of them came towards her room.

Clara returned the stately bow of Sir Thomas with quiet grace and dignity, and motioned her husband to stand back. But Will was too greatly excited to obey her, and indeed he took her extraordinary calmness to be further evidence of her insanity.

He held the note addressed to Sir Thomas Bufton in his hand.

"To receive the confession of a murderer," Will quoted from her note; "why, what's this, Clara?"

"The truth—the truth at last," she said.
"Sir Thomas, please read that paper, and

then," her eyes dropped with shame, "I'll sign it in your presence."

The stout hand of old Sir Thomas Bufton trembled as he laid the paper down before her, and Will stood staring in horror-stricken alarm as she took the pen and signed her name.

"Madam," said Sir Thomas, gravely, "do you propose to deliver yourself up at once to justice?"

"I am in your hands, Sir Thomas." But the dreadful reality she had now given to her crime seemed almost more than she could bear, and the stern old man himself was moved to pity by the dumb agony of her pale countenance.

It *was* more than she could bear. Her

heart's love wasted, her beauty wasted, her whole life wasted, and now its dreadful end becoming so visible ! She must die that Edward might live and be happy—be happy in the love, not her love, but the love of her whom she had hated—*had* hated, for she hated no one now. They whom she had known all became shadowy in the horrid glare which revealed her crimes to herself. It *was* more than she could bear. She drew the pistol from her pocket, and in another moment the barrel would have been between her teeth, but Will, seeing the action, caught her arm. They struggled, and before Sir Thomas could take his part in the fray, the pistol was fired and the room filled with smoke.

He saw Will stagger and fall backwards, with his hand to his chest. The pistol fell from Clara's hand, and both she and Sir Thomas leaned over the dying man.

"Don't move me!" he cried, in terror.

Clara lifted his head upon her arm.

"Clara, my girl, I know—you didn't—mean—to do it. Look out for those damned keepers—there's a hare in that wire. God bless——!" That was his last word; a slight shudder seemed to run through him as life left his body.

The room was filled with servants, brought together by the noise, to whom Sir Thomas directed the care of their mistress.

No part of this dreadful scene was more horrid than the stare—the vacant stare with

which Clara regarded the dead body of her husband as it was borne away by the servants.

She turned to her maid and said, laughing,
“Now, Birch, I’ll go to bed.”

She was mad, and became the incurable and most dangerous lunatic of the County Asylum.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

NEVER in the simple annals of Bingwell was there such rejoicing as upon the day that Edward brought his bride home to Hever Court. One crowd of friends and tenants met them at the railway station, and another, mainly composed of the villagers, greeted them at the park gates. Every one tried to catch for him or herself Lucy's sweet smile and graceful acknowledgments, and each believed in his own success.

At the gates the horses were taken out,

and willing men and lads drew the carriage through the park to the door of Hever Court, where there was great joy among the servants at seeing their own "Master Edward" back again.

Old Sir John Denman tottered to the door to meet them, with no anxiety but to embrace his darling daughter. He was very infirm, but his mind had returned to him before Lady Denman's death, which had happened about three months since.

"Dear father," said Lucy, kissing him tenderly, "you found your rooms ready for you? Edward says they are to be yours always."

The old man gave his hand to Edward with a feeble smile of gratitude.

They were happy. Happier, perhaps, for the influence and the memory of ended trials. None of the Franklands had been held in more respect than Edward and Lucy won for themselves from their neighbours far and near.

Mrs. Frankland, the wife of Mr. Snodgers, was discovered, and received from Edward a small annuity. Mr. Gribble was struck off the roll of attorneys, and betook himself to the career of a "promoter;" but in this he failed, for the "limited liability" mania was past, and although this great principle of joint-stock association flourished, yet people were no longer to be robbed by the simple agency of a prospectus, or by the lying figures of "authentic" lists. And only

lately, Lord Nantwich, who is very careless of his own hereditary senatorial honours, was proposing to Edward to stand for the county.

THE END.

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